

Isaiah 11:1–10: ¹There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. ²And the Spirit of the LORD shall rest upon him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

³And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear, ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; and he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt of his waist, and faithfulness the belt of his loins.

⁶The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the young goat, and the calf and the lion and the fattened calf together; and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den.

⁹They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

¹⁰In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Judged in Righteousness

INTRODUCTION

It's pretty difficult to walk into a Lutheran Church on the second and third Sundays of Advent and not hear about John the Baptist. Here in this season of Advent, when we are preparing for the coming of Jesus, John is the Bible's quintessential preparer for the advent of Christ. John the Baptist is the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy: "A voice cries: 'In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.'"

During his ministry, John fulfilled his prophetic calling to prepare the people of Judea for the First Advent of the Messiah by calling them to repent—turn from sin—and believe the Word of God.

And today, John continues to prepare God's people for the Second Advent of the Messiah

through the same call to repentance and faith that has been recorded in the New Testament Gospels. Each generation needs to hear this message—repent and believe the Gospel—for Jesus has come to save us from sin, and will come again as Judge of the whole world.

John was a fiery preacher, no doubt. And continuing my theme from last Sunday, sometimes when you read the Bible it sounds like God only wants to condemn and punish. Take today's Gospel reading: John proclaims a message that may sound to our ears rather scary: "I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Indeed, looking at the Old Testament reading from Isaiah chapter 11, the Messiah will come to judge in righteousness.

So, through John the Baptist, God calls us to prepare for Christ when He returns to judge the nations in righteousness—but this judgment is favorable for all who repent and believe the Gospel.

What does it mean, to judge in righteousness?

Righteous judgment isn't something the world is known for. The world—and we're very much part of the world—doesn't judge in righteousness, but by appearances, by wealth, by power, by good looks, by where you're from—or who you are. If you're a good-looking woman, you just might get out of a speeding ticket because you're cute. Right! That reminds me of the early 80s Burt Reynolds movie, Cannonball Run, about a cross-country road race. One of the female drivers, played by Adrienne Barbeau, was pulled over somewhere in Texas, I believe. So,

she quickly did her hair, checked her makeup and arranged her outfit to show a little extra skin, only to find it was a woman cop! So much for getting out of that ticket.

But worse yet, the world doesn't give you a "fair trial" because you're a Christian. The internet news site BuzzFeed, along with Cosmopolitan, have gone after Chip and Joanna Gaines, witch hunt-style. Chip and Joanna Gaines are very popular celebrities on the HGTV cable channel. Their crime? Their pastor opposes same-sex marriage and calls homosexual behavior a sin. The world indeed has judged them and found them wanting. That's not a judgment in righteousness.

But our Old Testament reading says that the Messiah will judge with righteousness: "but with righteousness He shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth ... Righteousness shall be the belt of His waist, and faithfulness the belt of His loins."

First of all, the prophet Isaiah says, "His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD." Jesus wasn't afraid of human beings—what they thought of Him—or what they could do to Him—nor was in interested in what they could do for Him. People often make unrighteous judgments because we're afraid of what people will say about us, or do to us—like kids on a playground who join in the bullying of another child so they won't get bullied themselves. Or adults who remain silent when another person is slandered so they won't get labeled a "do-gooder."

Also, people often do and say unrighteous things because of what we can get from people if we do what pleases them and not God. After all, Chip and Joanna Gaines—and many other Bible-believing Christians—are finding out that if you go along with the world, you're judged to be a pretty good fellow, otherwise you're a hateful, narrow-minded bigot.

But not Jesus. He's no people-pleaser. He doesn't care what the world thinks or says—or what it can do or not do for Him. In proper fear of His Heavenly Father, He gave His heavenly Father the greatest and highest honor and allegiance. There's no bribing Jesus, there's no threatening Him, there's no way to manipulate Him or His Words to somehow make His judgment more favorable to sinners. Unlike earthly judges, Jesus' judgments aren't influenced by money or the desire for political office or making friends in the right places. Having the proper respect for His Heavenly Father, Jesus comes to deliver truth and justice for all people—especially the poor and the meek—those who often suffer the most in this world from unrighteous judgments.

And then Isaiah writes: 2) He (that is the Messiah) will not judge by what his eyes see, or decide disputes by what his ears hear. Let's say you've been unrighteously accused of a crime and you must go to trial. Even if you have an honest and wise judge at your trial, that doesn't mean you'll get a righteous judgment. All judges are human. They don't know your heart. They don't know what really happened. They don't know if the evidence against you is valid or not. A judge must go by what he sees and hears in court. But evidence can be wrong, people lie, the facts can be misinterpreted, and there are always good lawyers who are masters of creating doubt in the minds of the judge and jury.

But Jesus is fully God as well as fully human—and so He knows all things. He knows when you are wronged—and he knows when you've done wrong. He knows when people are lying and when they're telling the truth. There's no hiding the human heart from Jesus; there's no way to deceive Him, and there's no lawyer who can manipulate the evidence or create doubt in Jesus' mind.

So, when Jesus judges, He judges in righteousness. As Isaiah says, when Jesus returns, “He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.” That means Jesus judges every person according to the unchanging Word and Will of God. The rich receive the same judgment as the poor, the strong as the weak, the educated as the uneducated, and the powerful as the powerless.

That pretty much means that we’re all poor and meek, for we will all face the righteous judgment of the God who knows our every thought, word and deed.

But is this judgment something Jesus wants you to be afraid of? No! For those who heed John’s call to repent and turn to God for mercy, to be judged in righteousness is actually good news—and why we sing with such joy at Christmas! For the believer, to be judged in righteousness means that the Righteous Judge has taken the punishment you deserve. What earthly judge would leave the bench and serve your sentence for you? But Jesus did—He went to the cross for you—to be judge and condemned in your place—so you could receive mercy from God and a favorable verdict on Judgment Day.

He did this out of His great love for you. For those who know and feel their sins—who repent and acknowledge that their sins have separated them from God, who know that we deserve nothing good from God, Jesus has come to save. Jesus said, “For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. Whoever believes in him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God” (John 3:17–18).

And because Jesus has won for you the forgiveness of sins, and through the faith that He has given you, you are righteousness in God’s sight. You will face judgment on Judgment Day—

all people must face Jesus' righteous judgment. But the judgment you will receive as a believer will be a favorable judgment of eternal salvation because your sins have been washed away in the blood of the Lamb of God.

Conclusion

There is very good reason the world will fear and tremble before Jesus on Judgment Day. In His First Advent, Jesus came to save, not condemn. But when He returns, it won't be to save, but to judge—to judge in righteousness. That's scary stuff! But remember what we prayed in today's Collect: "Stir up our hearts, O Lord, to make ready the way of Your only-begotten Son, that by His coming we may be enabled to serve You with pure minds; through the same Jesus Christ, our Lord, who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen."

There's no reason for you to fear that day because God has stirred up repentance and faith in you—God the Holy Spirit has prepared your hearts for the Second Advent of Jesus when He returns as righteous Judge. You've been baptized into Christ—you've been fed and nourished by His Word and Sacrament—and you wear Jesus as your righteousness—so you can be certain that the verdict you will hear when you come before the King on that day will be: "Well done, good and faithful servant."

In Jesus' Name. Amen.