

**Opening Prayer**

**Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit that, as the Scriptures are read and discussed, we may hear with joy what you say to us today. Amen.**

**Isaiah 11:1-10**

<sup>11:1</sup> A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
<sup>2</sup> The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. <sup>3</sup> His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; <sup>4</sup> but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. <sup>5</sup> Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. <sup>6</sup> The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. <sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. <sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. <sup>9</sup> They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. <sup>10</sup> On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

**Commentary**

**Background:** *This book can be divided into two (and possibly three) parts. Chapters 1 to 39 were written before the exile, from about 740 BC to about 700 BC. These were difficult times for the southern kingdom, Judah: a disastrous war was fought with Syria; the Assyrians conquered Israel, the northern kingdom, in 723 BC, and threatened Judah. Isaiah saw the cause of these events as social injustice, which he condemned, and against which he fought valiantly.*

In 745 BC, Tiglath-pileser III became king of Assyria; he was bent on conquering all of the west, including Israel. Isaiah wrote these words soon after. In the preceding verses, he has used *tree imagery*; he continues to do so here. "Jesse" was King David's father. A new "branch" will grow, a king descended from Jesse and David, but of a new kind. God's "spirit" (v. 2) rested on Moses, David and other leaders, enabling them to do the seemingly impossible. Six *gifts of the spirit* which God will give this king are listed here (v. 2): "wisdom", "understanding" and "counsel" will make him independent of foolish advisers; he will have "might" to defend his people, "knowledge" of God's ways and "fear" (awe), i.e. proper respect for God. This ideal future king will both be able to understand God's purposes for his people and have the power to bring them to effect. He will also exercise justice, thus aiding the underdog and those who hold God in awe ("the meek", v. 4). He will use his chastening "rod" and hot lethal "breath" to destroy the ungodly. In v. 5 "belt" appears twice; both are underwear. This king will hold justice and fidelity to his people as close to him as his underwear!

In vv. 6-8, the images of peace among animals speak of the restoration of the ideal state of harmony God originally intended, before humans revolted against him. (The “asp”, v. 8, and the “adder” are poisonous snakes.) Harmony will also be restored between animals and humans. No one in the whole of God’s domain (not just Jerusalem, “my holy mountain”, v. 9) will be in danger, because all will know God, i.e. observe his will, as surely as “the waters cover the sea”. This king will be a rallying point not just for Judah but for all peoples: they will see his achievements and “inquire” of God’s glory as reflected in him.

### **Reflection**

Isaiah’s vision of the Peaceable Kingdom in verses 6-9 has captivated human imagination for thousands of years. Where do you think this vision of perfect peace comes from: does God place in our hearts the longing for a Kingdom which none of us have yet seen?

### **Romans 15:4-13**

<sup>15:4</sup> For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. <sup>5</sup> May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, <sup>6</sup> that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. <sup>7</sup> Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. <sup>8</sup> For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, <sup>9</sup> and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; <sup>10</sup> and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; <sup>11</sup> and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; <sup>12</sup> and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." <sup>13</sup> May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **Commentary**

**Background:** *Romans is the first epistle in the New Testament, although not the first to be written. Paul wrote it to the church at Rome, which included both Jews and Gentiles. His primary theme is the basics of the good news of Christ, salvation for all people.*

The apostle Paul was writing here to the Church at Rome, a fellowship he had not yet visited, addressing an audience of both Jews and non-Jews (“Gentiles”). Paul tells of the value of the Old Testament, “written in former days” (v. 4). When Jesus’ suffering is seen as part of God’s plan (which began with Abraham and other patriarchs) “the scriptures” take on a greater meaning: towards the “hope” of eternal life. Vv. 5-6 are a prayer for harmony in the community, so that it may reflect God’s glory. In 14:1, Paul has written: “Welcome those who are weak in faith.”

In v. 7 he combines this with Jesus’ command to “love one another as I have loved you”. Why? “For the glory of God”, the reason Jesus came to us. Jesus was a Jew and ministered to Jews (“a servant of the circumcised”, v. 8) in order to demonstrate that the “promises ... to the patriarchs” are reliable (“confirm”) and to open up God’s promises to other cultural communities (“Gentiles”). Paul’s quotations in vv. 9-12 – from Psalms, Deuteronomy and Isaiah

– all show that others besides Jews were envisioned in God’s plan. Paul ends by asking God, the one in whom all cultures center their “hope” (v. 13), to fill his readers with “joy”, “peace” and “hope” - the key concepts in his quotations.

## **Reflection**

Here we have the apostle Paul speaking of the “root of Jesse,” quoting from our Old Testament reading for this week, Isaiah 11:10. On this Second Sunday of Advent, Paul reminds us that it is not for a select few that Christ, this branch of Jesse’s tree, has come: Christ came that all of humanity may be made whole. How do you conceive of your role in helping God to bring these world-redeeming promises to fruition?

## **Matthew 3:1-12**

<sup>3:1</sup> In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, <sup>2</sup> "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." <sup>3</sup> This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" <sup>4</sup> Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. <sup>5</sup> Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, <sup>6</sup> and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. <sup>7</sup> But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? <sup>8</sup> Bear fruit worthy of repentance. <sup>9</sup> Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. <sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. <sup>11</sup> "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. <sup>12</sup> His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

## **Commentary**

**Background:** *This gospel is the first in the New Testament, but it was probably the second to be written. The author shows an understanding of Jewish culture and religion not found in the other gospels. It was probably written about 60 to 70 AD, possibly for a largely Jewish audience.*

Matthew has told us of Jesus’ descent from King David, his birth and infancy, and the coming of the wise men. Now he leaps forward to about 26 AD. John appears in the “wilderness”, the arid region south and east of Jerusalem, an area where only hermits lived. His call to repentance, to turning back to the way of life to which Israel committed herself in its covenant with God, is like that of Old Testament prophets. His message about the nearness of God’s kingdom, of the time of complete fulfillment of God’s promises for humans, is a central message of Jesus. A new era, in which God rules, is almost here!

Originally applied to the exiles returning from Babylon, Isaiah’s words in v. 3 also fit John. He is dressed like a hermit (“camel’s hair”, v. 4) and he eats off the arid land (“locusts”, “wild honey”), as did Elijah. People came to him from both sides of the Jordan (v. 5) and were

baptized by him with water, in recognition of, and confession of, sin – with complete acceptance of God’s judgment and forgiveness. “Vipers” (v. 7) are poisonous snakes, a danger in the wilderness. John doubts the sincerity of “Pharisees and Sadducees”, thinking they are trying to avoid God’s adverse judgment (“wrath”); he challenges them to show their return to God in their lives (v. 8). He warns that being ethnically Jewish, a member of God’s people, is no guarantee of entry to the Kingdom; God shows no partiality (v. 9); he can have other “children”. Those who do not show in their lives that they have returned to God will be destroyed (v. 10). In v. 11, John foretells Jesus’ mission: giving people power to reshape the world (“with the Holy Spirit”) but also judging the ungodly, and purging them (“fire”). V. 12 puts this in farming terms: “wheat” was separated from “chaff” on a “threshing floor”; the wind blew away the “chaff”.

### **Reflection**

Every year at the beginning of the season of Advent, we hear from the fiery prophet John the Baptist, the one who “prepares the way of the Lord.” His message of repentance and judgment seems at odds with the more tender, gentle narrative of the birth of Jesus, just one chapter before. Why do you think we need to hear John’s message, year after year?

### **Responsive Psalter**

**from Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19**

<sup>72:1</sup> Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son.

<sup>2</sup> **May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice.**

<sup>3</sup> May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness.

<sup>4</sup> **May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.**

<sup>5</sup> May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.

<sup>6</sup> **May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth.**

<sup>7</sup> In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

<sup>72:18</sup> **Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things.**

<sup>19</sup> Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

### **Closing Prayer**

**Grant, O Lord, that what we have said with our lips we may believe in our hearts, and that what we believe in our hearts we may practice in our lives, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**