

December 4, 2022
Isaiah 11:1-10

Advent 2
Pastor Jeff Laustsen

“Trust-Filled Fear”

“The spirit of the LORD shall be upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”

If you were judging strictly by outward appearance, Norman’s Garage would not seem like a place where you would feel confident bringing your car for repairs. Unlike many of the other auto maintenance shops in town, it was an old, rundown building on a back street in one of the more decrepit parts of town. It did not have the latest diagnostic equipment, nor was there a comfortable lounge in which customers could wait while their cars were being serviced. The entire building smelled of oil and grease, and the windows had not seen a cleaner in decades. The cash register in what served as an office was covered in layers of grime, and when Norman appeared he looked as if he was the inspiration for Pigpen in the Peanuts comic strip. For anyone new to the community, Norman’s Garage would have been a place that could easily be overlooked or dismissed. But among all the service stations in town, Norman’s was the most popular. It might take weeks to get an appointment, and his customer base was so loyal that it was not unusual for generations of clients to bring their cars to him. When anyone asked why they brought their cars into such an unappealing place, the answer was always the same: “Norman’s someone we can trust. He is always reliable, and never tries to charge us for something we do not need. Norman is a mechanic in whom a person can turn to with absolute confidence.”

Finding someone like Norman, a person in whom we can put our trust in times of need, is a rare gift. In a world where too many people prove to be unreliable, disappointing us with inferior service or inflated prices, knowing that there are persons who will never violate our trust is a great source of comfort. This is true not only of people who provide important services for us, but people in whom we entrust our health, our wealth, our deepest secrets, and even our very lives. A person is truly blessed if they have persons in their lives who are trustworthy, who will never fail them or betray them.

Our Christian faith is rooted in the confidence that our God is always trustworthy, that God’s love is steadfast and sure, and that all of God’s promises will be fulfilled in God’s time. It is the confidence that assures us that the Word of the Lord we hear

proclaimed in worship is a word that speaks to us as it spoke to God's people of old. It is the blessed assurance that allows us to live each day in the comfort of a holy and certain hope, knowing that *"though the wrong seems oft so strong, God is the ruler yet."* (ELW Hymn 824). It is this hope that is rooted in our confidence in God's faithfulness that is at the heart of this Advent season as we prepare ourselves both for the coming of Christ at Christmas and for the day in which our Saviour will *"come again to judge the living and the dead, and his kingdom will have no end."* (Nicene Creed). It is this sure and certain faith that is reinforced by Martin Luther in the *Small Catechism* when he ends his explanation of the three articles of the Creed by the confident affirmation that *"This is most certainly true."*

On this Second Sunday of Advent, we once again hear the words of the prophet Isaiah speaking of a day in which God's promise of the coming of the reign of God will be accomplished. These verses *"articulate the deep and persistent human hope for justice and peace, and within the Christian church this text expresses the promise of a Messiah who will establish peace on earth."* (Gene M. Tucker). A prophetic voice speaks, proclaiming what the Lord will accomplish in the future. The unifying theme of this proclamation is the coming reign of God, both in the sociopolitical order by means of the birth or ascension of a new and ideal king from the line of David and in the order of creation with the establishment of peace and tranquility among all creatures. The words spoken by the prophet *"offer a sense of hope for a time of peace and new potential in relationships between former enemies."* (Cory Driver). This hope-filled proclamation begins with the promise of a future king from the line of David: *"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots."* (Isaiah 11:1). Isaiah saw the Davidic Monarchy as the Lord's means of implementing God's Will, first for Judah and Jerusalem and then for the world as a whole, based on the covenant that God establishes with David and affirmed in the Psalms:

- "Moreover, the LORD declares to you that the LORD will make you a house. When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body, and will establish his kingdom. He shall build a house for my name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever." – 2 Samuel 7:11-13.
- "I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me, 'You are my son; today I have begotten you. Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage, and the ends of the earth your possession. You shall break them with a rod of iron, and dash them to pieces like a potter's vessel.'" – Psalm 2:7-9.

The character of this ruler will be shaped by the “*spirit of the LORD.*” (11:2). This “spirit” (*ruah*) represents the active and creative divine presence known at creation (... *a wind from God swept over the face of the waters*” – Genesis 1:2) and in the inspiration of the prophets (“*But as for me, I am filled with power, with the spirit of the LORD, and with justice and might, to declare to Jacob his transgression and to Israel his sin.*” – Micah 3:8). The coming of the spirit of the Lord ordained and authorized kings and other leaders (“*But the spirit of the LORD took possession of Gideon; and he sounded the trumpet, and the Abiezrites were called out to follow him.*” – Judges 6:34). In Isaiah, the ancient charismatic ideal of leadership is applied to a dynastic royal figure. The spirit of the Lord endows the king with three pairs of gifts, each described as “the spirit of”:

- “The spirit of wisdom and understanding” – these terms refer to practical wisdom that enables a ruler to face reality and deal with it fairly. Solomon prayed for and received such wisdom (“*Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, able to discern between good and evil; for who can govern this your great people?*” – 1 Kings 3:9). The book of wisdom known as Proverbs states that “*a ruler who lacks understanding is a cruel oppressor.*” (Proverbs 28:16).
- “The spirit of counsel and might” – these terms refer to diplomatic and military judgment and authority that will be needed by the king to protect his people from enemies who will seek to conquer and destroy them (“*Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to the king’s son ... May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor.*” – Psalm 72:1-3).
- “The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” – these terms refer to the king’s piety, which consists in acknowledgment of and reverence for the Lord; “*the fear of the Lord is itself a gift from God.*” (Tucker). This phrase had led to a great deal of confusion over the years, with many people interpreting “the fear of the Lord” to mean that one should live in terror of an angry, vengeful God. Martin Luther struggled with this understanding of God until he came to realize that it did not mean one should live in terror of God’s retribution for sinfulness, but that one should hold God in the highest awe and reverence as the God who “*so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him shall not perish but shall have eternal life.*” (John 3:16).
- “Then I grasped that the justice of God is that righteousness by which through grace and sheer mercy God justifies us through faith. Thereupon I felt myself to be reborn and to have gone through open gates into paradise. The whole of Scripture took on a new meaning, and whereas before the ‘justice of God’ had

filled me with hate, now it became to me inexpressibly sweet in greater love ... This it is to behold God in faith that you should look upon his fatherly, friendly heart, in which there is no anger nor ungraciousness.”

A ruler who is endowed with “the fear of the LORD” is one who lives in reverent awe of God’s holiness, who honours the Lord as the God of great glory, majesty, purity, and power: “*True fear of the Lord causes believers to place their faith and trust in Him alone for salvation.*” (Olive Tree Blog). The fear of which Isaiah speaks is defined by Proverbs as “*the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom, and the knowledge of the Holy One is insight*” (Proverbs 9:10). To fear God means to hate evil and to turn from it. “The fear of the LORD” grounds human knowledge and wisdom in humble service of the Lord God of Israel. Without the God of Israel, the best human wisdom becomes folly, because God alone holds the world and all outcomes in God’s hands (“*He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, ‘Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.’*” – 1 Corinthians 1:30-31). “The fear of the LORD” expresses the total claim of God upon humans and the total life response of humans to God:

- “So now, O Israel, what does the LORD your God require of you? Only to fear the LORD your God, to walk in all his ways, to love him, to serve the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your soul, and to keep the commandments of the LORD your God and his decrees that I am commanding you today, for your own well-being.” – Deuteronomy 10:12-13.

Those who fear the Lord pursue moral good and shun evil (“*O fear the LORD, you his holy ones, for those who fear him have no want.*” – Psalm 34:9). The call to live in holy fear of the Lord means that “*all human activities are undertaken in light of God’s presence and purposes in the world.*” (Raymond C. van Leeuwen).

A king who lives and reigns faithfully according to the gifts in which he is endowed is one whose “*delight shall be in the fear of the LORD*” (11:3), living in holy reverence that trusts in the steadfast love and presence of God. This king’s administration will concentrate on his establishment of justice and righteousness: “*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth*” (11:3-4). In the light of the gifts of the Spirit, this ruler will act as one who sees and hears deeper than what is on the surface, and will ensure that the poor and meek have full protection under the law:

- “For he delivers the needy when they call, the poor and those who have no helper. He has pity on the weak and the needy, and saves the lives of the needy. From oppression and violence he redeems their life; and precious is their blood in his sight.” – Psalm 72:12-14.

Such establishment of justice entails the enforcement of sanctions: *“he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.”* The ideal king, the one for whom *“righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins”* (11:5), will exercise authority and power to protect the weak; *“this king will with full authority and full attention correctly stand on behalf of the oppressed, clothing himself in vestments of righteousness and faithfulness.”* (Christopher Seitz).

The rule of justice in human society is followed or paralleled by a transformation in the relationship among animals and between animals and human beings. In this beloved image of the “Peaceable Kingdom,” the subject of many great works of art, *“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.”* (11:6). In the vision in which he receives his prophetic call, Isaiah hears the angels of the LORD singing *“holy, holy, holy is the LORD of hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory”* (6:3); now the whole earth is full of the knowledge of God *“as the waters cover the sea.”* (11:9). The centre of this peaceful cosmos in which predators and prey shall coexist and in which even *“the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den”* (11:8) is the one who dwells on the holy mountain amid God’s people. As the Lord God abides in this peaceable kingdom, the one who will command swords to be turned into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks (2:4) now commands God’s people that *“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.”* The ruler who descends from David and continues his covenant rule is the one who *“shall stand as a signal to his peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.”* (11:10). The one who continues the rule of the house of David brings the promise of God’s presence and protection to not only the people of Israel but to all nations, so that all may know that *“the fear of the LORD is the beginning of wisdom,”* the knowledge that we can place all of our trust and faith in the God whose promises are always fulfilled and whose steadfast love endures forever.

- “This is the mountain of God’s holiness. This is the promise, the glorious, abundant resting place where the root of Jesse stands. This is the vision of

security. The root will grow tall and become a visible sign for the nations. Not a battle standard, but a standard of peace.” – Anatheia Portier-Young.

The words of Isaiah speak to us during this Advent season of the coming of one who will fulfill God’s Will in bringing about a peaceable kingdom in which all that seeks to destroy God’s creation will be no more, where everything that seeks to destroy us and separate us from God’s steadfast love will be no more. This promise is fulfilled in a place as unlikely and unappealing as Norman’s Garage: a humble stable in Bethlehem, where the child of Mary is laid in a feeding trough surrounded by barnyard animals. Yet in the dark streets of that little town of Bethlehem shines “*the everlasting light; the hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee tonight.*” The fear of suffering, death, and violence that gripped the world then and still grips the world today is replaced by a different kind of fear, a holy fear that calls us to trust in the Lord whose Word is steadfast and whose promises can be trusted, the fear that calls us to focus our attention on God’s presence and to devote our lives to serving God and fulfilling God’s Will on earth as it is in heaven. As Luther reminds us repeatedly in the *Small Catechism*, we are to “*fear and love God,*” placing God at the centre of our lives and trusting in God’s divine protection and everlasting love. As the coming of the Christ Child brought great joy to all who found the son of Mary “*away in a manger,*” we can find joy and hope as we place our trust and confidence in the one who came to bring the life-giving fear of God to us so that we might live in trust and hope that the coming of Christ is the fulfillment of God’s promise of *Emmanuel – God with us.*

May the life-giving fear of the Lord give us hope to overcome the life-crushing fear that surrounds us; may the light of Christ shine brightly in the darkness that surrounds us, for no darkness can overcome the light and life that are ours in the one who reigns with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

Amen.