

## “Disturbing Order”

Rev. Ken McGarry at The First Congregational Church in Stoneham, Massachusetts  
December 4, 2022 – First Sunday of Advent

[Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12](#)

A pastor preached her final sermon at her church before retiring. At the conclusion of her final service, she stood in the back of the sanctuary and shook the hands of her parishioners as they left and said their farewells. One of the elderly church members greeted the pastor as he made his way out of the sanctuary, saying to the outgoing minister, “Whoever is called to serve this church next as its preacher certainly will be not as good as you are!”

With a little bit of false modesty, the retiring minister replied, “Oh, nonsense. I’m sure the next preacher will be wonderful.”

“No, really,” the elderly gentleman responded. “I’ve been here for the last five ministers, and each new preacher has been a whole lot worse than the last!”

Yes, sometimes in life, just like in this story about progressively worse preachers (unfortunately for you all, I’m preacher number 39!), just when you think things couldn’t get any worse, they do. Sometimes, just when you think life couldn’t get any harder, it gets harder. Sometimes, just when you think the world couldn’t become a bigger mess, it gets messier. This is all part of the order of the universe, that over time, left to be as they are, things tend to become more disordered and disorganized. Left to be as they are, over time, things *will* get worse and *will* simply fall apart.

This is the disturbing order of things that the prophet Isaiah envisions God disturbing. In today’s reading, we are told that Jesse is but a stump. What we are not told in today’s reading is how the tree of Jesse, the father of Israel’s great King David, became a stump. In *earlier* chapters of Isaiah, the prophet foresees that the reign of David’s descendants would end as God would use the enemies of unfaithful and unjust Israel and Judah to chop away at them until they were cut down. Isaiah goes on to tell that the tree cutters themselves would also be cut down because of their own pride, violence, and unjust ways.

Into this bleak vision of nations destroying one another, leaving nothing but ruins and a field of stumps, God sends another vision -- a promise -- to the people of

Israel: The reign of David's descendants would not end, even though they were but a stump, which, left to be as it was, surely would have simply decomposed and disintegrated. All was not bleak and hopeless, for God would disturb the natural order of things and make rise from the roots of the stump a new shoot, a new ruler from the line of Jesse. And God would further disturb the order of things through the reign of this ruler, who would oversee a realm in which the lowly would receive mercy, justice would be enjoyed by all, and the innocent and defenseless ones would dwell securely in peace. In this new realm, the order of things will be completely reordered as vicious predators, wild beasts and human nations alike, will no longer hunt and devour their prey, but would live together in peace.

This beautiful vision of a peaceful realm is also what John the Baptist also saw as he baptized people in the wilderness. Our reading from Matthew's gospel tells us that coming to John for baptism, a symbol of repentance, of the death of one way of being and the rising of a new way of being, were all the people of Judea and the region around the Jordan river. John even baptized many of the Pharisees and Sadducees, members of warring religious/political tribes, who were warned by John to be trees that bore good fruit, such as justice, mercy, and peace, lest they be cut down like the trees of Isaiah's time. And as John baptized and warned, he proclaimed that the coming of God's just and peaceful realm on earth, where the disturbing order of things would be disturbed and reordered, had come near and was at last at hand in the coming of the one who would baptize people with God's Spirit.

The gospel of Matthew goes on to identify this ultimate disturber of things as Jesus, who was identified in the beginning of the gospel as the Christ, or Messiah, ruler in the line of David. In the coming of Jesus, the reordering of things had begun. This shoot, rising from the stump of Jesse, would live among us, and, filled with God's Spirit, would show us how to create a new order, to make Isaiah's vision of a peaceful world a reality for the world's people.

And so we live in an in-between time, as the realm of God on earth has been made real in the shoot of Jesse that has arisen from its stump, and the realm of God is *becoming* realized as the tree of Christ grows and produces in abundance the good fruits of justice and peace for the world's people. Our hope in this

Advent season, is that Christ's reign would continue to grow throughout the world and in our own hearts.

This is our prayer because we need more of Christ's reign, more of Christ's way, in our old, stumpy world, which is way too long on violence and way too short on peace, where too many powerful lions still attack and devour the lowly lambs and too many snakes still slither and strike, poisoning us and our children. When will we learn to leave the old, disturbing order behind, and to no longer invade the nations next to us? When will we disturb the order of things enough that we are no longer willing to allow our children to be gunned down in their schools? When will we finally cut down the systems that allow words and acts of hate to spread in our midst?

This Advent, will you let Christ disturb the order of your heart? Will you let Christ cut away the parts of your life that don't produce the good fruit God desires, or the parts that actively produce bad fruit that harms you or others? Will you let Christ's way of love and peace grow and flourish in your stumpy heart? Will you commit or recommit to joining the order of Christ followers, who engage in acts to disturb the order of this decaying world?

Friends, let us all be open to God's disturbing work, in us and through us, today and always. Amen.