



# THE CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH OF NEW CANAAN

SERMON – December 9, 2007

Christmas: See it like a Native!  
The Reverend Harold E. Masback, III

## Isaiah 11:1-10

*1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 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. 3 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; 4 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. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 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. 10 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.*

## Matthew 3:1-12

*1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 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.'" 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 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? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 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. 10 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. 11 "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. 12 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."*

One of the many wonderful tasks of serving as your ministers is our walk around the north side of the meeting house just before entering the main doors for Sunday worship. Every week I take a little detour, walking out under the maple tree and pausing to look up at the steeple through the branches. The foreground view changes from season to season: spring buds, summer greenery, fall color, winter silhouettes, but the background view hasn't changed since 1842: the crisp white lines of our spire reaching, pointing, soaring toward the heavens. Our spire aspires.

Now, our Puritan forebears didn't believe God was up "there" instead of down "here." They were pretty sturdy in their faith that God was everywhere, but I think they designed their New England spires to remind us that there is a loftier, grander, deeper dimension of life than the busy clamor of our ground level distractions.<sup>1</sup> Pausing to gaze up at the spire helps me to remember that for all the urgency of what we plan, or do, or say in worship, our one indispensable aspiration is simply to prepare a space in our hearts for the infinite depth and mystery of our God.

I offer a quick little silent prayer and then come through the doors to join the choir in a warm sanctuary filled with friends, hymns and hopes. It is always a blessing, never more so than during the Christmas season. The wreaths on the walls, the snow on the ground, the old Advent processions draw us all into traditions of the season that are as familiar and comfortable as a well worn slipper.

I'm tempted to say it's a Christmas scene right out of Currier and Ives, but our forebears were worshipping in this very room when Nathaniel Currier and James Ives

were still in grade school, and I'll bet our hymns, our wreaths, our scriptures haven't changed a wit since then. In fact, isn't that one of the reasons we love Christmas so much? We experience so much of life as a whirling, swirling, spin into the unknown, that we yearn for the known, reliable comfort zone of Christmas sights and sounds. Christmas takes on something of a Sturbridge Village quality: a timeless place we visit once a year to see great history reenacted - to enjoy simple, unchanging traditions.

The most unvarying of those traditions is, of course, the Christmas story itself, and Matthew opens his Gospel by colorfully retelling the Nativity events as an introduction to his larger account of Jesus' ministry. Joseph stands by Mary, Mary gives birth to Jesus, wise men bear their gifts, and the young family flees Herod before finally returning to Nazareth. By the end of Matthew's second chapter, everything is in place to turn to the main story of the Savior's work.

As the curtain finally rises on chapter three, we lean forward straining for a glimpse of our star. Only Matthew has been setting us up.

Surprise! As the curtain pulls back we see not Jesus, but rather John the Baptist, the prophet my old mentor, Paul Minear, called a "hairy, fantastic scarecrow of a figure clad in camel hair,"<sup>2</sup> washing down locusts with desert honey, and crying out in the wilderness. He was "a nobody appearing nowhere, talking in scare-language about an ax and fire. To hear him people had to drop everything and go out to the wilderness."<sup>3</sup> Even the upstanding people of substance had to forsake all other types of security, confess their sins and join the "riffraff of penitents who had nothing to lose and everything to gain."<sup>4</sup>

What in the world is going on here? Has Matthew lost the thread of his story? Accidentally dropped the literary ball? Of course not! Matthew is a master storyteller with his subject completely in hand.

Matthew knows all about the comforting charm of the nativity stories: they were already old and familiar to his congregation when he wrote them down. But Matthew has much more in mind than mere history, and he wants us to experience much more than soothing, comfort-zone reenactment. Matthew doesn't want us to experience Christmas from the

outside like a tourist. Matthew wants us to experience Christmas from the inside like a native. Matthew isn't going for nostalgia; Matthew is going for transformation.

Matthew knows that Christmas is only partly a story about something that happened to someone else and long ago. More importantly, Christmas is about something that could happen to you, something that could happen to me. As Lowell Streiker wrote, "If the Christ is born in Bethlehem a million times, and trudges the dusty roads of Palestine, preaching for a million years, but is not born in your heart and life - and in my heart and life - then what difference does the Gospel make?"<sup>5</sup>

You see, my friends, the spiritual issue for Matthew's community, the spiritual issue for each of us this morning, is the same as it has been for every person of faith for two thousand years. Think of your heart as a throne built for one. The perennial spiritual question is: who is going to sit on that throne? You or God? As C.S. Lewis wrote, "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.'"<sup>6</sup>

And the spiritual rub for Matthew's community, the spiritual rub for each of us this morning, is also the same as it has been for every person of faith for two thousand years. If we know even a little about ourselves, we know how hard it is to prepare room for God on the throne of our hearts. To quote C.S. Lewis again, "Almost all of us are atheists in practice, though we may profess belief in God. We may visit temples, attend services, repeat prayer; but we do all this with a kind of reverent inattention, or sacred negligence. We deny God's existence in everything that we do. We bow down before the world, flesh, and power. [Francis] Fenelon writes in his letters: 'There is practically nothing that men do not prefer to God. A tiresome detail of business, an occupation utterly pernicious to health, the employment of time in ways one does not dare to mention. Anything rather than God.'"<sup>7</sup>

There are of course, fox hole times in our lives when God-centered living comes more naturally. A loved one becomes seriously ill, economic catastrophe looms, our way of life or very existence is gravely threatened. Of

course: knock us well and truly out of our comfort zone, and God suddenly has our complete and undivided attention. We leap off the thrones of our hearts and beg God to have a seat.

You might call these fox hole experiences the wilderness journeys of our modern lives. The anxieties unleashed by the threats we face cast us into a psychological wilderness, beyond our comfort zone, beyond the steady rhythms of civilization, beyond the cultivated boundaries of life. The anxieties cast us into an unpredictable place, an uncharted place, a wild place.

Our treks through the wilderness are by definition times of disorienting physical and emotional suffering, but they are also almost always spiritually rich and fruitful times. The sheer exigencies of our wilderness experience strip us of our comforts, conveniences, and complacency. No one needs to tell us twice to “prepare the way of the Lord.” In our distress, every fiber of our being asks, yearns, seeks for a glimpse of a loftier, grander, deeper dimension of life, for a sign of the infinite depth and mystery of God. We fly to God like an injured child running to her Mother.

So, it is little wonder that time and again in the Bible it is the physical wilderness where God’s chosen are pulled out of their familiar rhythms and prepared for an encounter with God. Moses was tending sheep in the wilderness when he met God in the Burning Bush [Exodus 3:1-2]. The Jews met God in the wilderness at Sinai. [Exodus 19:1-3]. God hid David from Saul in the wilderness. [1 Sam 23:14]. God’s Spirit descended on Jesus when he was baptized in the wilderness [3:13-17]; and the Spirit then led Jesus into the wilderness for a time of temptation and preparation for his ministry. [4:1-11].

Yes, we love the known reliable comfort-zone charms of the nativity story - and Matthew gives them to us in chapters one and two – but, if we’re going to see Christmas like a native, if we’re going to prepare space for the Christ child in our hearts this Christmas, if we’re going to open a space in our souls for the infinite depth and mystery of God, then we too must keep our chapter three rendezvous with God’s wild-eyed prophet in the wilderness. We too must follow

John the Baptist out beyond the settled, well marked rhythms of our daily lives.

So where is our wilderness? Where is the unfamiliar, uncharted, unpredictable place where we can journey to prepare the way of the Lord? Where can we go to encounter the new born Christ this Christmas? Well, you might book passage to a remote trackless waste or forested wilderness, but, given the high price of gas this season, I want to suggest that there are two wildernesses of infinite complexity and challenge right here in this room. One of them is in your own heart, and the other is in the hearts of those sitting all around you.

John Updike wrote, “You land it seemed to him on the shore of your own being in total innocence, like an explorer who was looking for something else, and it takes decades to penetrate inland, and map the mountain passes, and trace the rivers to their sources, even then, there are large blanks, where monsters roam.”<sup>8</sup> There, in the wilderness of your own being, there in one of your own large blanks, there is an old wound you just can’t heal up; an old conflict you just can’t resolve; an old compulsion you can’t tame, an old guilt you can’t escape.

Lord knows how you have tried to untie the knot in your soul, to make the rough place smooth, to make the crooked path straight; but you have begun to give up hope. Perhaps you feel diminished, less fully alive, maybe less acceptable - even to yourself. Maybe there’s even a shadow side to your Christmases, a reluctance to welcome the Christ-child into such an untidy heart. But my friends, it is there, right there that John the Baptist is crying out in the wilderness, “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight!” Right there God is seeking to embrace you with God’s forgiveness and acceptance, seeking to give birth to new life. But first you must make room for the Christ child. First you must invite God back onto the throne of your heart.

The infinite wilderness of your heart is matched by the infinite wilderness of the hearts all around you. Think of all the stories in this room! Every face looks out at you with an “I’m all right, Jack” smile. But behind every set of eyes peers a soul with a unique set of stories: stories of joy and sadness, stories of triumph and failure. What every soul most wants - what every soul most wants - is to be attended to, to be appreciated as a

person of dignity and worth. None of us can do this for ourselves; all of us can do this for each other. Christ is waiting to be born in you so he can minister to your neighbors in their wilderness.

A neighbor's heart, like your heart, is an uncharted, unpredictable, uncontrollable wilderness. It is a scary trail to follow, a risky place to make yourself vulnerable. But it is right there that John the Baptist is a voice crying out; and if you have the courage to respond, it is right there that you and your neighbor may together find the Christ child born anew this Christmas.

My friends, this week, as you go about your errands and busy schedules in our "Snowy Village," pause every once in a while and look up. When you are in Starbuck's parking lot, pause, turn and look up the hill. When you are going into Franco's, or Bank of America, or J. Crew, pause and look up over your right shoulder. When you are going into Talbots, or Gate's, or Ching's Table stop for a second and look over your left shoulder.

There, peeking up over the grey, leafless, lifeless tree limbs, peeking up as it has for hundreds of years, will be the spire of this church. See it as a tourist and you'll see the reassuring, classic white steeple of a New England village church. But lean into, step into, live into the Christmas story and you will see a love letter from our forebears, reminding us that there is a loftier, grander, deeper dimension of life; you will hear a voice crying out in the wilderness, "prepare the way of the Lord;" you will feel the Christ child approaching, seeking out room in your heart. **Amen.**

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1 Paul Tillich, "The Lost Dimension in Religion," in *The Religious Experience* (Vol. II), edited by George Brantl (1964), page 586 ("Our daily life in office and home, in cars and airplanes, at parties and conferences, while reading magazines and watching television, while looking at advertisements and hearing radio, are in themselves continuous examples of life which has lost the dimension of depth. It runs ahead, every moment is filled with something which must be done himself. Only if he has moments in which he does not care about what comes next can he experience the meaning of this moment here and now and ask himself about the meaning of his life. As long as the preliminary, transitory concerns are not silenced, no matter how interesting or valuable and

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important they may be, the voice of ultimate concern cannot be heard. This is the deepest root of the loss of the dimension of depth in our period—the loss of religion in its basic and universal meaning.) or seen or said or planned. But no one can experience depth without stopping and becoming aware of

2 Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2003) p. 39

3 Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2003) p. 39

4 Paul S. Minear, *Matthew: The Teacher's Gospel* (Wipf and Stock, 2003) p. 39

5 Lowell D. Streiker, *Pastor's Complete Handbook of Model Sermons* (Prentice Hall Direct, 1992) p.260

6 CS Lewis, *The Great Divorce* (Touchstone, 1996) p. 72. Here is the quote, in its context: "There are only two kinds of people in the end: those who say to God, 'Thy will be done,' and those to whom God says, in the end, 'Thy will be done.' All that are in hell, choose it. Without that self-choice there could be no hell. No soul that seriously and constantly desires joy will ever miss it. Those who seek find. To those who knock it will be opened."

7 CS Lewis, *Surprised by Joy* (Harcourt Brace, 1975) p.177

8 John Updike, "Baby's First Step" in *The New Yorker* (July 27, 1992) p.24