

December 4, 2022
"J is for ..."
Isaiah 11:1-9 / Matthew 3:1-12
Pastor Tim Emmett-Rardin

J is for ... Jesse.

As in Jesse, the father of David. King David. And it's worth noting, the grandson of Ruth – as in the Book of Ruth. As powerful a witness to love and faithfulness and courage and resistance as there is in the biblical record.

Matthew's aim is to assert Jesus' royal and divine lineage. Going all the way back to Abraham, with, by the way, a whole bunch of J's in between. So J is also for ... Jacob, Judah, Jesse, Jehosophat, Joram, Jotham, Josiah, Jechoniah, and then eventually another Jacob, the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary. As in Mary, the miraculous mother of Jesus.

We'll get to that story soon enough this Advent season. J, of course, is also for ... Jesus. But back to Jesse. The description from the prophet Isaiah likely comes out of the Syro-Ephraimite war, roughly 8th century BCE – a period when the Davidic dynasty, the Judean kingdom, was at a particularly low point. A stump, as Isaiah puts it, compared to its enemies at the time.

For the record, in case you're feeling impressed with my extensive knowledge of biblical history, I had to look that up!

But Isaiah's point here is that a "shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." New life will emerge from where new life seemed impossible.

Amy and I had a pretty big honey locust tree in our back yard cut down a couple of years ago, cut down to a stump – which we opted to keep. And it has been amazing, and frankly, irritating, to find little shoots of that tree showing up all over the place, in our yard, in our neighbor's yard. Over and over again. From a stump.

Life finds a way. Amen?!

According to Christian interpretation, the shoot, the branch, that would emerge from the stump of Jesse is Jesus, viewed as the Messiah. The One the prophets foretold. The One on whom the Spirit of God would rest. The One who would judge with righteousness and decide with equity, as Isaiah puts it.

J is for ... judge. Judgment. We get in both the Isaiah and Matthew texts this morning dramatic, apocalyptic images of judgment. In Isaiah: "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear, but with righteousness will 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." That's the prophesy.

In Matthew, we're introduced to John the Baptist.

J is for ... John the Baptist. The camel-hair wearing, locust-eating preacher who called out in the wilderness a gospel of repentance, of turning back to God and turning back to divine love, because God's kingdom was near. Time was, is, of the essence.

He invited people – people, by the way, from Jerusalem and all over Judea, to pledge their commitment to the kingdom through the ritual of baptism. Baptized in the River Jordan.

He castigated the Pharisees and Sadducees, the teachers and keepers of Jewish law, for overplaying the hand of their esteemed lineage – all the way back, you guessed it, to Abraham.

"Bear fruit worthy of repentance," he said. It doesn't matter who you are or where you come from or what you believe.

"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."

J is for ... judgment.

And the text goes on, with John pointing as he always did to Jesus, preparing his way. "I baptize with water," John says, "but ... 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 will gather wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

J is for judgment, indeed! And if you make the mistake of taking such texts literally, as many in the church have and still do, judgment is about punishment – including eternal punishment. It's cause for fear. For drawing lines in the sand. Repent or die.

But there is a method to the madness of such prophetic texts, such dramatic, apocryphal, prophetic texts.

One purpose, I believe, is to drive home what Dr. King called the “fierce urgency of now.” The critical importance of the present moment. Life is lived in the moment – today, not tomorrow. Tomorrow is not promised, so you know, don't put off 'til tomorrow what you can do today. Life, abundant life, depends on it.

The other point of such images, METAPHORS, like an ax at the root of a tree, or the agricultural winnowing fork and threshing floor, is to drive home the need, OUR need, to distinguish – within ourselves – between what is life-giving and what is not. What is necessary for life, and what is not. What is fruitful, and what is not.

The wheat is life-giving; the chaff – the dry, scaly protective casing of the grain seeds – is not. Well, at least not for people.

As Steve Garnaas-Holmes suggests, “The image of trees cut down is not a warning of the fires of hell (please!), but about working with growing plants to produce more abundant crops. The image of the threshing floor is not ... about separating “good people” from “bad people” but about sifting our lives to bring forth what is fruitful and discard what is not. The images of cutting trees and burning chaff are not images of judgment and destruction but images of growth, change and fruitfulness.”

Growth, change and fruitfulness. Not repent or die, but repent AND LIVE!

Repent and live, John the Baptist said, pointing to Jesus. And Jesus said, pointing to God. Not out of fear, but out of love. Bear fruit worthy of that repentance, worthy of that commitment.

The kindom of God is ALWAYS near. The kindom of God, the kindom of love, is ALWAYS at hand, but its coming, its realization, requires our investment in it. We are called, like John the Baptist, to prepare the way for it.

It's near because God is who God is; it only comes closer if and when we live, NOW, in this moment, each moment, as the children of God that we are. When we live as those created for love, and so live and LOVE like everyone else, the rest of creation, is too.

THIS is the good news of the gospel, the running thread of Jesus' ministry through his life and through his death: repent and live. Turn back, again and again and again, to God, the very source of love and you will find new life. Turn back, again and again and again, to love. Love for each other as yourselves. Turn back to community. Turn back to common good. Turn back to justice.

J is for ... justice.

Repentance is never simply a personal act. It is both an individual and collective ritual of participation IN, commitment and re-commitment TO, the whole. The body to which we all belong, whether we like it or not.

The point of turning back is to turn back to the embrace of God, and to the gift of embracing and being embraced within and among ourselves.

And so for the prophets, from Isaiah to John the Baptist to Jesus, judgment is not, IT IS NOT, about punishment! It's about justice.

Judgment – and with it, repentance, salvation – always points us back to justice and righteousness. To right relationships. To the peace, the deep, abiding peace that comes WITH justice.

“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. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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.”

This is pure fantasy, of course, but it paints a powerful picture of a world marked by peace and justice. Imagine it. We can't get there unless we picture it first. Vision drives commitment. Preparation.

"In the prophetic message," says Steve Garnaas-Holmes again, "salvation isn't about God rescuing us from the world's threats. It's about re-creating a world that's not so threatening. Salvation is God's work; but we have to cooperate in that transformation. We have to seek and establish and maintain justice."

And hear this: "God's justice doesn't mean everybody gets what they deserve, but that everybody gets what they need."

That's the kind of judgment we're talking about here.

So J is for Jesse, and the hopeful Advent reminder that shoots and branches always find their way out from the stumps.

And J is for John the Baptist and Jesus, for sure. J is for judgment.

But ultimately, J is for justice.

May it be so.