

“The Fruitful, Peaceable Kingdom”
Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

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At first glance, our Scripture lessons this morning seem an odd assortment. Our Old Testament lesson is lovely. The Peaceable Kingdom: God’s justice and righteousness rule over the earth. The wolf shall live with the lamb. The lion will eat straw like the ox. A little child shall lead them. It’s a beautiful image and has been captured in art many times.

Our Romans lesson is also wonderful. In God’s realm there is hope for everyone, even Gentiles. (That means us, by the way.) In God’s realm we will overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

Then, there’s John the Baptist. Nothing gentle or peaceable about John. The axe is at the foot of the tree. “You brood of vipers,” he says to the religious leaders. At this time, vipers were thought to eat their young. John’s point is the religious leadership is tearing down the common people. They are not building them up.

“Don’t you dare say”, he says to them, “We have Abraham as our ancestor.” Don’t you dare say, ‘I was baptized. I was confirmed. I go to church. I read my Bible. That’s what matters.’

All those are good. Don’t get me wrong. We need to do them! All of them. But those are only externals. They’re not the core of who we are, of how we live.

Think of an apple tree. When we look at an apple tree and we think what a great tree it is, are we admiring the colorful leaves? Are we commenting on how firm and stately the branches are? Are we admiring the size of the trunk or the beauty of the bark?

No. Of course not. When we look at an apple tree and we think what a great tree it is, we’re thinking about the apples. We’re admiring the quality of the fruit.

John is calling us to bear good fruit. Baptism, confirmation, worship: They matter. They strengthen the fruit, how we live. But John is calling us to look beyond how lovely our trees are and to concentrate on the fruit.

John is calling us to live in ways that say, ‘I am a follower of Jesus! By the things I do, by the way I live, you can tell I am a follower of Jesus.’

OK, John. That's well and good. But how does a follower of Jesus live? What are the fruits of someone who lives the way Jesus wants us to live? What does bearing good fruit look like?

In the Epistles, they're called the Fruit of the Spirit. We live lives of faithfulness to God and one another. We don't go off on someone, even if they deserve it. We practice self-control.

We are patient. Jesus will come again in God's good time. Until then, we joyfully live like Jesus. We practice goodness, gentleness, and kindness. We are not cruel, or mean, or hard on each other.

We are people of peace who live in peace and bring peace to wherever we live or work or go to school. And we love. Not just one another. Not just other Christians. We love everyone – regardless of how unlovable they are.

When we are living the fruit of the Spirit, we are not tearing down. We are building up the community. Building up and strengthening and purifying the community. When we are living the fruit of the Spirit, we are creating hope for everyone. We are creating the Peaceable, Fruitful Kingdom. We are creating God's Kingdom on earth.

This is what John is calling us to do. Live in a way that builds up the community. And do it now. This is urgent.

What's that old expression about the best time for planting a tree? The best time for planting a tree was thirty-years ago. The second-best time is now! Right now. Do it now.

When is the best time to start bearing good fruit? When is the best time to live as followers of Jesus? Now. Right now. Bearing good fruit can't wait. Do it now!

When we do, we are creating a Peaceable, Fruitful Kingdom. A place on earth where all are welcome. Where all fruits are brought and celebrated. A world where there is hope in abundance. In other words, the Kingdom of God on earth.

On second thought, I guess, our Scripture lessons don't seem such an odd assortment. When Jesus comes, we will live in the Peaceable, Fruitful Kingdom. The land where there is acceptance and hope for everyone.

Until then, there's still time. There's still time to live like we mean it. Don't put it off. The axe is at the root of the tree.

Bear good fruit. Live together in relationships where all are welcome. Where all are celebrated. Where there is hope for everyone to know how much God loves us. Bear good fruit.

By God's grace, may we do it now. Amen.