

Second Sunday of Advent

A Sermon Preached by The Rev Ian M Delinger

on December 7, 2025

Isaiah 11:1-10 / Romans 15:4-13 / Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 / Matthew 3:1-12

We thank You, God, for the wilderness.

Wilderness is our place.

As we wait for the land of promise,

teach us the ways of new living, lead us to where we hear Your word most clearly,

renew us and clear out the wastelands of our lives,

prepare us for life in the awareness of Christ's coming

when the desert will sing and the wilderness will blossom as the rose. Amen.

Someone *very important* is coming!

- *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him*
- *The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles.*
- *One who is more powerful than I is coming after me. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*

We know that it's the Messiah ... it was Jesus of Nazareth, and it *will be* His Return. And these prophets took it upon themselves to urge the people to prepare for the Messiah's coming. As we await the Parousia, we would do well to continue to heed these words. But our context is very different than the contexts of Isaiah, Paul and John the Baptist:

- Today's bit of Isaiah is from the end of the 8C BCE, when Judah was under threat, first from Damascus and then the Assyrians, which eventually led to their conquering and exile.
- Paul's Letter to the Romans was set *after* Jesus had risen and ascended, but *before* Jesus' return, and Paul certainly thought Jesus was going to return in his own lifetime.

We are where Paul's listeners are, but we have 2,000 years of extra waiting *and* 2,000 years of human history, much of which involves Christians doing some not-so-good things, *and* 2,000 years of technological advances ... all of which can lead to that apathy and/or anxiety around the Parousia that I preached on last week. But nonetheless, we are to prepare ourselves, to be ready, to keep awake!

On today's Gospel, bishop and biblical scholar Tom Wright makes the comment about getting ready:

You may think your house is reasonably tidy and well kept, but if you suddenly get word that the king is coming to visit, you may well suddenly want to give it another spring clean.

I wouldn't. I would want the king to know *exactly* how people without servants live ... including if that king were Jesus who came to serve and not be served. But I'm like that: WYSIWYG.

I'm gonna name-drop here. So, if you're an eye-roller at name-dropping, get ready! I've been in the presence of the late Queen Elizabeth II of Great Britain and Northern Ireland four times, and in the presence of the then-Prince Charles, Prince of Wales twice. Two of the times I was in the presence of the Queen were at Buckingham Palace Garden Parties hosted by Her Majesty and attended by other senior royals.

Now ... in terms of preparation, there is a very strict protocol that accompanies one's invitation. One must present oneself in a particular way. How one is to prepare oneself is much more detailed than any of the prophets' instructions in today's readings. As for attire, I quote from the British royal webpage regarding garden parties:

Gentlemen wear morning dress or lounge suits (which are completely different suits than the terms imply in the American vernacular),

*while women wear day dress, usually with hats or fascinators.
National dress and uniform are also often worn.*

I picked up on the “national dress” bit and exclaimed to anyone who listened:

It says we can wear national dress. I’m from California. Does that mean I can wear shorts and a t-shirt?

And *that* is what I want to explore today: At *the heart* of our preparation for our next encounter with Jesus – whether that’s the Second Coming, at the Pearly Gates, or in the poor and needy who greet us on the streets, or in the Sacrament – at the *heart* of our preparation is to be able to be your *authentic self* with Jesus.

Authentic self may come with fears and anxieties as well as pride over accomplishments and satisfaction with your station in life. It no doubt comes with some prejudices, but if you are your authentic self, you will recognize those prejudices and understand why you have them. Your authentic self might come with family problems. The Woman at the Well:

‘I have no husband.’ Jesus said to her, ‘You are right in saying, “I have no husband”; for you have had five husbands, and the one you have now is not your husband.

It may come with disease:

As Jesus was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy met him. They called out in a loud voice, “Jesus, Master, have pity on us!”

As God, Jesus knows these qualities about you. Why try to mask them with airs & graces? John the Baptist is calling us to repentance, and I think that part of repentance is understanding and presenting before God and everyone your authentic self. Our readings are about *internal* preparedness. That internal preparedness comes with exploring who is your genuine self, and what would

prevent you from presenting your genuine self to the Messiah if He were physically in your midst. Isaiah tells us that when he says:

He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear.

Dressing up or conforming to a dress code and a behavior protocol hide those trees that do not bear good fruit. He who comes will know who the actors and distractors are! Those were the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism. They had no interest in what that Baptism meant. They were hedging their bets from what they had heard about Jesus and John the Baptist.

What our readings today are telling us is that that the Church is different than a Royal Garden Party. God's vision for our world is different than the society we have built for ourselves in which what we really mean by "*Put your best self forward*" is "*Show everyone to what degree you can conform to societal norms.*" What God wants for our world – according to today's readings – is a place where each person can live their authentic self in peace, with equity and inclusiveness, and in which all are worthy.

We put on those airs & graces because society tells us to, but also because you fear that your genuine self is not good enough. We spend our energy trying to be good enough, to be a model citizen, to be above reproach. But if we live faithfully and continue to understand our authentic selves, what we don't like about ourselves will be made new...through living faithfully. Faith and hope push out apathy and anxiety.

The Church should be a model for what God wants for the world. The Church should be a place where you can be your authentic self. It should be a place where you can explore your authentic self. And it should be a place where you can work through the more challenging parts of your authentic self so you can be the full person God created you to be. Church should be that place where you can express your apathy and anxiety while being surrounded by faith and hope. The

Church should be a place where learn to love the person God made you, and where you discover God's image within yourself.

That doesn't mean that Sunday mornings should be therapy sessions. Worship or pastoral care are not substitutes for professional support. It also doesn't mean that we only express the positive aspects of the human condition on Sunday mornings. Our worship should explore the breadth and length and depth of the human condition and lift it up to God, because that's what God came into world to experience, and that's what God will come for again when all things are made new.

It's the faith and hope, though, that are the foundation of being your authentic self. That is the work of repentance. Repentance is not about feeling sorry for your mistakes. It's not even really about trying to be a better person. And while repentance evokes feelings of unworthiness, or even fear of being considered chaff on the day of judgment, repentance is about transformation into Christ's image. God became a man in order to understand the struggles of being human, and we were created in God's image, therefore we owe it to ourselves and to our faith in God to be our authentic selves.

What is really behind the Royal Garden Party protocol and other social norms that we have dredged up over time is that the earthly Kings and Queens don't *want* to see your authentic self. The bosses in the office don't want to see your authentic self. They want everything to be *nice*. Pleasant. It's not about you, it's about them and the institution.

The "*One who is coming who is more powerful than I*" wants to see and know and love your authentic self. Today's readings are calling for a new world order that can only exist if everyone lives authentically, a new world order that is:

- a world of true peace, peace among not only enemies, but between prey and predator;
- a world filled with divine justice and righteousness in which the social structure works for everyone;

- a world of inclusivity and equity, for the circumcised and the uncircumcised;
- and a world in which all are worthy.

Through today's readings, we are warned that someone very important is coming and that we need to be ready for, not only the One, but for a new world order. And in that call to readiness, we are not being called to piety; we are being called to authenticity.