

WGUMC December 8, 2013 Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12
"Ready or Not, Here Comes the Kingdom"

*One day, making tracks
In the prairie of Prax,
Came a North-Going Zax
And a South-Going Zax*

So begins my favorite Dr. Suess short story. The two self-directed Zax both come to the very same place in that wide-open space. They bump and they stand, "foot-to-foot, face to face." Then the two begin arguing about who needs to move:

*I'm a North-Going Zax and I always go north.
Get out of my way, now, and let me go forth!*

But the other one will not yield:

*...you're in MY way! And I ask you to move
And let me go south in my south-going groove.*

So the two are stuck there with one of them proclaiming that he won't change his ways even if he has to stand there for fifty-nine days. But the other will last for fifty-nine years because he has always lived by a rule that he learned back in South-Going School:

*...Never budge in the least!
Not an inch to the west! Not an inch to the east!
I'll stay here, not budging! I can and I will
If it makes you and me and the whole world stand still!*

Thus we come to the dramatic conclusion:

*Well...
Of course the world didn't stand still. The world grew.
In a couple of years, the new highway came through
And they built it right over those two stubborn Zax
And they left them there, standing un-budged in their
tracks.*
["The Zax," in Dr. Suess, *The Sneetches and Other Stories*, 1961]

Now children always find the characters in this story pretty ridiculous. I wonder, then, why we adults keep electing them to Congress? Whenever I read this story, I want to send a copy to Washington, to the United Nations, and I wish it could be read at the start of the next round of Middle East Peace negotiations.

I'm not just being silly. I honestly want to know why change is so hard for grown-ups? As I pointed out last week,

we all started out as babies, changing and needing changed all the time.

When Hank and I were preparing for our first child, we had to make the monumental decision: cloth or disposable? We went with cloth. We got a diaper service that sent us diapers every week and a newsletter every month. In the newsletter, they published the diaper honor roll with the names of all the toddlers who had graduated from diapers. I think they should have included the parents who survived upwards of 10,000 diaper changes! That's a whole lot of change by the time a kid is two and a half or three.

This year, we have a nursery theme in the sanctuary and a diaper wreath on the altar. I'm not kidding. Come look at it. It was made by Jennifer Frost in celebration of the birth of Christ, of course, but also in anticipation of the birth of her sister's baby next year. In a million years, I wouldn't have come up with this idea, but it's out there in Google land.

The wreath is made up of disposables and one big advantage they have over cloth is that they hold a lot more and don't have to be changed so often. But therein lies a danger. So I got to thinking: We who have long since graduated from diapers, are we not still holding too much and not changing often enough? As Dr. Suess might say:

*Then as we get older and change less and less,
eventually the world becomes a big mess!*

Enter John the Baptist. He appears in the wilderness, in the Palestinian version of the Prairie of Prax, to preach to a bunch of North-going and South-going Zax. And all that he has to say to us can be summed up in one word: "Repent!" Literally, turn around! Change direction! You're going the wrong way. Listen to me. I'm here to prepare the way.

John warns us that the kingdom of heaven has come near. And it is a warning because the kingdom doesn't look anything like the world we are living in. What the Bible calls the kingdom of God, we call plain kooky. In Isaiah's vision, it's a world where

all the rules have been rewritten. The wolf lives with the lamb!
The leopard lies down with the kid! "The calf and the lion and
the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

And don't think it stops with the lion and the lamb. In
God's world—where nature's enemies live in harmony—people
are supposed to live together in justice and equality. At least
Nelson Mandela thought so. He knew that the apartheid system
in South Africa was the very antithesis of the peaceful kingdom
in the Bible. He had a vision of that kingdom and appeared in
the wilderness of his nation. Over many hard years he called
rulers to repentance. And when the tables were finally turned,
he prepared a path to forgiveness.

Now Mandela was no Messiah. He was just a Methodist. In
1918, he was born into a royal family in South Africa, the great
grandson of a Thembu king. He was first given the name
Rolihlahla, a Xhosa term meaning "troublemaker." Kind of like
John the Baptist, except that Mandela managed to keep his

head. His parents were both illiterate, but his mother was a Christian and sent him at the age of seven to a local Methodist school. There he was baptized a Methodist and given the name "Nelson" by one of his teachers. After the death of his father, Mandela was raised by guardians who made sure he was in church every Sunday. He attended another Methodist school, then a Methodist college, and lived in the Wesley House dormitory and taught Bible classes while he was in the university.

You probably won't hear any of this coming from the reporters who are telling us what we should remember about him, but Mandela's Christian faith was absolutely central for him. And he spent a lifetime bearing fruit worthy of his baptism. His faith held out for him through 27 years of imprisonment. It was his faith that kept his soul from drowning in bitterness and his mind from stewing in vengefulness.

When he was finally released from prison and then elected his country's first black president, Mandela set up the Truth and Reconciliation Commission to do two things: to give the victims of apartheid the chance to tell their truth and to give soldiers and members of the former regime the chance to take responsibility for their actions in exchange for leniency. To lead the Commission, Mandela chose Archbishop Desmond Tutu, the one who likes to say, "Without forgiveness there is no future." And in a few short years, these two men set the gold standard for how a country can stop the cycle of violence and begin the slow process of reconciliation. If you think that the message of Jesus can't be applied directly to national policy, think again.

President Obama said, "We will not likely see the likes of [Nelson Mandela] again." But the question more pressing for me is, will the world ever see the likes of us? What Truth and Reconciliation Commission do we need to set up in our own lives? What Peace Prize is waiting for us to do what we know

God wants us to do in our families, our workplaces, our communities and in our country? What changes can the world expect from us? What does repentance and bearing fruit worthy of it look like for us?

I know these are not the questions we have time to answer in the Christmas season. But now seems to be the time when life often asks them. The holidays can be a very stressful time. Add family concerns and it's crazy, come-to-Jesus time. In other words, kingdom time. In the next few weeks, if we don't stay centered in Christ, everything that isn't going right in our lives will conspire to make sure that everything goes wrong.

So let's be sure that we don't go through the holidays as the two Zax tried to go through the Prairie of Prax. Remember: not every dream of perfection, not every holiday tradition is worth holding onto. The perfection is just an illusion. And the traditions that used to define family for us will have to change

because families change. We'd better move because the new highway is coming through.

A new kingdom is coming into view. So, attitudes and behaviors that are no longer bearing fruit need to be cut down and thrown out. "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees."

Even now, in this busy time, we better start rewriting the rules, because ready or not, here comes the kingdom, where the wolf lives with the lamb and the lion eats straw like the ox and (as Dr. Suess might say):

where poverty, disease and war are no more
and there's no great divide between the rich and the poor;
where the first and the last, the strong and the weak,
the young and the old, the greatest and the least,
all sit down together for a big family feast;
where ex-husbands and wives find a way to forgive
and fragmented families find a new way to live;
where children are loved and sheltered and fed
and the lost they are found and the wayward are led;
where homeless men and women don't die in the cold

and none of us get left alone when we're old;
where no one gets hurt but all is restored
by the grace flowing down from the mountain of the Lord,
and the knowledge of God fills up the whole earth,
and all of us will praise the creation's new birth.