

Plants and Animals

In the name him who baptizes us with the Holy Spirit and with fire, dear friends in Christ: We all know that during his earthly ministry our Lord Jesus did a lot of his teaching in the form of parables; that is, he'd tell stories using familiar items and experiences drawn from people's everyday lives in order to explain heavenly mysteries. And certainly, some of the parables are among Jesus' most popular and, more importantly, best remembered teachings. There's something about being taught in story form that makes the instruction easier to hear and retain. Also, the mental images of a parable serve to reinforce the point. I mean it's one thing to talk about God's forgiveness for his lost and wayward children in an abstract, clinical sort of way, and quite another to be able to see and vicariously experience it in the actions of the prodigal son's father. It's truly a case of a picture being worth a thousand words – which no doubt is why Jesus so often taught in parables.

But it would be wrong to think that Jesus was doing something new and novel by teaching in this way. In truth, he was only following a rich tradition that permeates the entire Scripture. The writings of Moses and the prophets are full of parables and parable-like images that the Lord uses to help us get a better understanding of him and his will for us. As an example, in last week's sermon message I explained how the inspired writers used topography, that is the relative elevation of plains and mountains, to illustrate spiritual truth. The picture was that we live our lives in sin on the low spreading plain, and how God calls us to come up off that plain to his holy mountain where he draws us closer to himself and fills us with his Spirit and lets us partake of his glory. The idea is that he raises us up to a higher level of life than we live in the toilsome, flat plain of sin. And we heard how the prophet Isaiah described the day in which we live now, when the holy mountain of the Lord, that is, the Christian Church, would be the highest of all the mountains and how people from every nation would come to it to worship the Lord and receive his forgiveness and everlasting peace.

Well, it just so happens that in this morning's Gospel reading, John the Baptist is tapping into some of this same imagery. It's no coincidence that he chose the low-lying Jordan River valley – the deepest place on earth, some 1200 feet below sea level – as the place of his ministry. His job, remember, was to prepare people for the coming Savior by bringing them low. He wanted to make them feel the guilt and burden of their sin, and help them to understand just how far they were from the Lord and his righteousness. So, anyone going out to hear John preach would have to physically descend, and thereby be forced to enact how they were coming down off their hill of pride and the mound of their imagined goodness. To hear John, you'd have to leave behind your comfort zone of cool breezes and shade trees and mountain streams and go down low into the parched and gritty desert. And then, when you arrived, after blistering your skin and scorching your soul with one of his hellfire and brimstone sermons, he'd take you lower still, into the murky Jordan River water, in order to show your baptismal death to sin and your rising to new life. So, you can see how John utilized the lay of the land itself to illustrate how his hearers must be brought low and made to feel the heat of God's wrath against sin before they could be lifted up in God's forgiveness and mercy.

Good. Then with that understanding, what I'd like to do this morning is look at a couple more of these parable-like illustrations that show up in today's Old Testament and Gospel readings. Specifically, I'd like to consider what we can learn from plants and animals.

Going first to John the Baptist, we heard how people from Jerusalem and Judea and the surrounding areas were going out to hear him. And we can picture this: they are people from all walks of life; but in particular they are for the most part people who already feel a sense of spiritual dryness. They know something isn't quite right with their spiritual health. And so they're going out to John to hear a doctor's diagnosis. They know they're sick. But John puts a name on their sickness. He proclaims God's holy law and he calls their sins what they are. And then he prescribes the antidote: confession, repentance, and trust in the soon to be revealed Savior.

Ah, but then he spies among his hearers some Pharisees and Sadducees. We've talked about them before. The Pharisees were strict legalists who strived to observe the whole law of God – which sounds good, I suppose; the trouble is that they did it in a cold, mechanical sort of way. They were obsessed with the minutiae of the letter of the law; but were unable to capture any of its true spirit of love. Nevertheless, they imagined that their extreme devotion to following rules made them better than everyone else. The Sadducees, for their part, were the theological liberals of the day. They thought of themselves as being more enlightened than run-of-the-mill believers who accepted the Word of God in childlike faith. They had rationalized away what they saw as the myths and superstitions of Scripture, boiling it all down to a few simple ideas that involved living your best life now by trying to be nice, taking care of your family, and seeking a comfortable compromise with the philosophies and ways of the world.

So, the Pharisees and Sadducees together represented both ends of the Jewish religious spectrum, and they were bitter enemies of each other. The irony is that from John's point of view they are the same: both sides are in error. Both sides imagine that they are somehow morally superior to others in the crowd around them. And so, both sides have missed the truth of God and the purpose John's ministry, which is to call desperately sick and dying sinners to repentance. These outwardly religious people had come down off the mountain with their feet; but their hearts and their opinions of themselves were still high up in the clouds. And that's why John reserved his fiercest verbal assaults for these whom seemed to be the most religious. First, he calls them "a brood of vipers". The picture is of a nest of snake eggs hatching and all the little creepy things wriggling and writhing about in a confused mass. It's a pretty unpleasant description – one that's sure to get their attention—especially since by it he's essentially saying that they are the offspring of *the* serpent, that is, Satan himself. And in a spiritual sense, they indeed are, for they have been thoroughly infected with the deadly poison of his deceptions.

And now that John has their attention, he introduces the metaphor of the trees. There's only one kind of fruit that has any value around here, he says, and that is the fruit of repentance – of heartfelt sorrow over sin. Nothing else matters: not the struggle of the Pharisee to achieve godly perfection or the Sadducee's pursuit of worldly wisdom and the good life. As eye-pleasing and mouthwatering as such fruit looks from the outside, inside is only death. It's all bad fruit. And there's only one solution for a tree that produces it: chop it down and chuck it in the fire. John's message to the Pharisees and the Sadducees is the same message he has for us: you prepare to meet your

Savior by letting go of everything you think you have to offer. Your works, your achievements, your enlightened understanding of things, your goodwill for your fellow man, your tolerance, your desire to live and let live, whatever it is you value about yourself and think God ought to be pleased with—it's rotten fruit. And the tree, that is you who produce it, needs to be cut off at ground level. The axe is at the root of the tree, John says, let the Lord swing away. Then and only then can you begin to produce the good fruit of repentance.

How? How does the chopped off stump of a tree produce anything? The answer comes to us in today's Old Testament lesson. There the prophet Isaiah provides the theological backdrop for John's botanical allusions. Isaiah mentions the stump of Jesse. It's a reference to the line of kings that started with David, who was Jesse's son. David's descendants had sat on the throne of all Israel for a while and then ruled over just the nation of Judah for a total of about four hundred years. But because of the Jewish people's unfaithfulness to the covenant (and that would include the king's unfaithfulness too) the Lord had taken away their self-governance. They were instead ruled over and oppressed by a succession of foreign nations for a period of about another six hundred years. So, it seemed to everyone that the line of the kings of the house of David had been cut off. It was nothing but an apparently long dead stump.

But with prophetic foresight, Isaiah spoke of a day to come when that long decayed stump would suddenly and unexpectedly send forth a green shoot that would grow into a tree and bear fruit. That is, a king in David's line would arise from what appeared to be dead end. This king, Isaiah declared, would be endowed with the Spirit of the Lord, and he would rule in truth, justice, and mercy. We know, of course, that Isaiah was speaking of Jesus, who is indeed a king born of the house of David.

And if we combine the thoughts of Isaiah and John – men separated by more than 700 years of history but united in the same Spirit who spoke through them both – the picture will come into focus for us. In a spiritual sense, each one of us is like that stump of Jesse. We're dead and decayed inside with sin. If anything manages to grow out of us on its own it'll only bear bad fruit. That's because it grows out of faith in ourselves – and faith in ourselves is the opposite of faith in Jesus. That useless and misguided growth is what needs to be cut down and burned up. All of it. Leave only the dead stump, for from it true faith in Christ can grow. It comes of despairing of everything we are and have to offer and trusting entirely in Jesus and what he offered for us: namely his life as the atoning sacrifice for our sin. And when that living branch begins to grow from this old rotten stump amazing things can happen. Then we can bear the fruit of repentance which is the life of Christ that he lives in us.

What does that look like? Well, for this Isaiah switches the metaphor from plants to animals. Specifically, he presents to us the picture of carnivorous animals like lions, leopards, and wolves peacefully coexisting with the kind of creatures that would normally be their dinners. The thing to understand is that it's another parable-like metaphor. He's not talking about some day in the future when we'll be able to open all the cages in the zoo and let the animals roam free without having to worry about them eating each other or us. No, we know that he's speaking of the day in which we live now because he mentions both the reign of Christ and his holy mountain, which we saw last week was picture of the Christian Church. That's the kingdom in which Jesus reigns today.

With that in mind, we understand that these animals Isaiah mentions represent people – in particular the kind that are by nature the mortal enemies of each other. And it shouldn't be hard for us to think in these terms because we routinely use animal references when describing people. Positively we might say someone is noble like a lion, or strong as an ox, or wise like an owl. Negatively people have been described as pigs, skunks, weasels, rats, old goats, chickens, turkeys, donkeys, donkeys by other names, horses, parts of horses—you get the idea. I suppose we could play that children's imagination game that asks the question, "If you were an animal, which one would you be?" But I wonder if the animal we might pick for ourselves would be the same one that others would see fit to assign us if given the chance. Perhaps that's the wrong way to think of it anyway. Instead, in a world in which some animals are predisposed to kill and eat others, we should recognize that in our sinful lives at times we have been both. Sometimes we've done the eating, and other times we were the ones being eaten.

The point is that this inbred tendency to either attack or be afraid of each other is overcome here in the Church. Repentance is the great leveler, the great equalizer. Since none of us has anything to offer but our sin, no one is higher up the food chain, so to speak. Here we are united in our faith in Christ and what he did for us, so lions and lambs, former Pharisees and Sadducees, every believing person – from the recent convert who could have been described as the worst of depraved sinners to the one who's lived his whole life in the Church—all gather together around the same table, and all receive the Lord's forgiveness in Jesus' body and blood. Here, gathered together in Christ, we enjoy true fellowship and peace. *That's* what the fruit of repentance looks like. And when we live in such repentance for our sin, and when we have such a childlike faith in Jesus, then we as God's little children can play near that old serpent's den without any fear of him doing us harm.

Isaiah says, "In that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal for the nations ... and his resting place shall be glorious." That day is today. And his signal or standard is the sign of the cross upon which he gave himself for us. Its shadow is our glorious refuge and resting place on God's holy mountain. As our Advent preparations continue, may our gracious God bring us to true repentance and faith that we may enjoy a foretaste of its fruit now in time and savor its fullness in eternity. In Jesus name. Amen.

Soli Deo Gloria!