

December 4, Second Sunday of Advent: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

## **The Bible uses the word *fear* both for fright and awe. This week's texts reveal the difference.**

by [Calvin Chinn](#) in the [November 8, 2016](#) issue

My wife has an office in a building where one of the tenants periodically discards dried-up orchid plants. They all end up in our home. My wife sees something more in these discarded plants than dead stumps. And sure enough, with care and in time, tiny shoots and buds appear on the dried-up, seemingly dead branches.

Sometimes we treat God's children in similar fashion. This is tragic. They may be the homeless or those with physical or developmental disabilities, discarded on our streets. Racial profiling is another way we treat people as disposable, viewing them with suspicion and behaving accordingly, sometimes with ghastly consequences.

There are plenty of reasons to be fearful these days—we don't need anyone to fan the flames of fear. In a May article in the *Atlantic*, writer Neal Gabler addressed his economic anxieties as a self-described middle-class American. He confessed that if he were faced with a \$400 medical bill or car repair, he would not be able to pay it. According to Gabler, nearly half of Americans would have trouble finding \$400 in a crisis. This produces fear, which in turn leads to a preference for building walls instead of bridges, to blaming and demonizing others as the source of our insecurity. In the face of dried-up stumps we become vulnerable to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. And so we give up on others and discard them.

Fortunately, reality is not up to us. Whether we are ordinary citizens or candidates for public office, we do not define reality. If there is anything we need to be reminded of time and time again, it is that there is something larger than human beings. I read the Bible for many reasons—for wisdom and counsel, for knowledge, for poetry and stories and myth. But most of all, I read the Bible to be reminded that I should stop trying to think and act like a god.

The Bible is rich with descriptive language for God. One of my favorite examples is the Hebrew word *ruah*, which appears in this week's Isaiah text and is commonly translated *spirit*. It also means *wind* and *breath*. God, like the wind, is unpredictable and beyond human control and management. According to Isaiah, God's spirit intrudes on our present reality and disrupts it—offering new and daring possibilities. “The poet refers to God's life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind,” says Walter Brueggemann, “which can create an utter newness.” The wind blows over the stump and creates new possibilities.

This election season, both major parties and both presidential candidates tried to calm the nation's fears. Catchy slogans were designed to inspire hope—from “Make America great again” to “No ceilings, the sky's the limit,” from “Law and order” to “When barriers fall, paths are opened to all.” The Bible uses the word *fear* not just in the sense of being afraid, frightened, and scared but also in the more important sense of awe and reverence. Paul Woodruff defines reverence as “a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame.”

This week's Gospel text introduces John the Baptist, who bursts onto the scene preaching repentance. Because of the strange description of how wild John is, we are tempted to dismiss him a bit too quickly. John does not fit the norm of how we picture ordinary people. Like so many other people, he is subject to our prejudicial dismissal. So in appearance as well as in word, John the Baptist preaches repentance—a command to reorient ourselves, to turn from our former ways, to change our attitude and perceptions. And those whose hearts do not change, who lack integrity and character, John indicts as a “brood of vipers,” challenging them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” This is a command to act out of awe and reverence instead of out of being afraid.

Reverence begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations. “I alone can fix it,” says Donald Trump. Woodruff writes: “An irreverent soul is arrogant and shameless, unable to feel awe in the face of things higher than itself. As a result, an irreverent soul is unable to feel respect for people it sees as lower than itself—ordinary people, prisoners, children.”

Isaiah's vision of the peaceful kingdom only looks like an impossible dream from the perspective of the arrogant, those who rely solely on themselves and refuse to listen to anyone else. People may see the world as a dried-out plant, a dead stump. God

sees the potential for shoots and branches. In our time, they remain mere shoots and branches; much unfinished work remains to be done. As John announces, “the kingdom of heaven is near”—near, not here.

As for the rescued orchid plants in our home, my wife gives most of them away to family and friends. The few we do keep grace our home, adding beauty and hope.