

Two different visions (Matthew 3:1-12; Romans 15:4-13; Isaiah 11:1-10)

I'm always amused when folk are keen enough to notice the worship whiplash to which the tradition so often subjects them.

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It is something I learned to watch for at the beginning of my pastoral ministry. One of those early Sundays, right after rising to the lectern and praying that all would “hear with joy” what was being said in the scriptures, the liturgist began what was supposed to be an amended version of Psalm 137. But because he was reading from his personal Bible, he missed the sticky note with “STOP HERE” written in red marker. So, he continued on to verse nine, where the writer delights in rock-dashing infantcide.

While most people didn’t even notice, the irony was not lost on him. “Uh,” he stammered and turned toward me, “That seems mighty harsh.”

In the pairing of the letter to the Romans with Matthew’s introduction of John the Baptist for the second Sunday of Advent, the keepers of the Revised Common Lectionary present a particularly interesting dichotomy. One would assume they are matched because together, along with the selection from Isaiah, they form an arboretum of allegorical trees. This, in itself, is fraught with tension: John the Baptist is holding an axe to one, while Isaiah and Romans revel in the promise (or realization) of new growth.

Yet I find the richest incongruity in how Paul and John each aim to build community.

The apostle seeks an aspirational alliance between different populations: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

And yet, only moments later in our liturgy, we have the baptizer welcoming the Pharisees and Sadducees to the river: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Produce fruit in keeping with repentance.”

One preaches of unity and the other proclaims a new conformity. One seems sweet as honey while the other just eats it. Two differing ethics, two differing aims, thus leaving the preacher with the thankless job of choosing which gets greater time—the pastoral or prophetic voice—or simply hoping nobody is awake enough to notice.

Maybe this is why so many congregations jump ahead to the Christmas musicals during Advent.