

Sermon – Matthew 3:1-12; Isaiah 11:1-10  
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Grace Lutheran Church  
2 Advent – Year A  
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### “Stumped”

Sisters and brothers in Christ, grace be unto you and peace in the name of God the Father and our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ. Amen.

1. The man and his son stand in the garage, surrounded by boxes. Boxes, we soon, learn, that contain 25,000 imported Italian twinkle lights. Clark Griswold, you see, is going to light up their home with enough Christmas lights to make their home one of which they can be proud; a home that will be so brightly lit that the power company will have to switch over to auxiliary nuclear power. But before they can decorate, they have to prepare. Clark tells his son, Rusty, that he has to check every bulb. Reaching into a box, he pulls out a huge, tangled mass of cords and bulbs that looks like it will take hours to untangle. So he simply hands it to Rusty, saying, “A little knot here. You work on that.” And Rusty is left with the impossible task of untangling the whole mess. The scene, from my favorite Christmas movie, *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation*, gets a chuckle because who hasn’t wrangled with tangled lights? The laugh also comes because of the understatement of the sentiment. There is nothing little about the knot, and it will no doubt require plenty of poor Rusty’s time to straighten things out.
2. We are now well into this Advent season of preparation. Perhaps you’ve been untangling strands of light; perhaps you’ve been rewatching your favorite Christmas movies. Today we hear the Baptist’s clarion call: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” The problem, you see, is that the pathways from the Lord to us have become incredibly tangled. This is no little knot that we need to work on. And these are not roads that need to be

- repaired. The paths are the pathways of our hearts, our lives, meant to run straight and true toward God but are instead knotted up, turned inward, tangled up into dead ends. Tangled up like a brood of vipers. The vision of the Peaceable Kingdom, lifted up in hope by the prophet Isaiah, is a far cry from the reality we've created. Leaders with righteousness? Predators and prey transformed into playful kindred? Children playing without fear of pain or want or separation? A world filled with nations turning to God? No, this is not where our lives have led us.
3. So John calls us to repent. To turn around. The problems we have created for ourselves and for this world are of our own making. We are the ones who have sinned by walking down paths that lead us away from God, even if we'd prefer to blame something else. That's the problem with humanity, as Vladimir quips to Estragon in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*: we are always blaming our boots for the faults of our feet. No, it is not our boots, our circumstances, that have led us astray. We have created and curated this very-much-not Peaceable Kingdom; we are the trees that have failed to bear fruit. We are the ones called to repent, to turn down different, better paths lest the ax of judgment cut us off at the roots.
  4. Of course, we cannot quite manage to do it. Our interior lives are a mess of good intentions gone wrong. Our public discourse has become so broken that now we don't only argue about what the solutions are, we argue about what the problems are. What hope do we have to avoid the Lord's winnowing fork? Well, simply put, we have the hope of Christmas – not the lights or the movies that are signs of the season, but the thing itself: Christmas. At the start of today's passage from Isaiah, we see a righteous warrior king, putting wicked enemies to flight. As Isaiah continues, however, we see another image of the king – this time as a little child at play in a world of peace. Our hope is in this child for whom Isaiah and all Israel yearned, this child whose birth we will celebrate soon. This child, Jesus, is God-With-Us. This does not simply

- indicate proximity, nearness. Jesus as Emmanuel means that God is *with* us, tangled up in our flesh and seeking us out in our lostness.
5. In the coming of the little child who leads, we see Isaiah's vision of the Peaceable Kingdom inverted. Whereas the prophet foresaw a mighty king who would enact a justice that would lead to peace for the children, in the incarnation of Jesus we see a child who lives with a peace that results in a justice that sets things to rights. Jesus plays over the den of adders and asps, the vipers with whom we brood. Jesus, born with promises of peace of earth, will walk in the way of peace, refusing to return violence for violence. And when it is time for the ax to fall, Jesus will let him fall on him. Jesus, God-With-Us, is so with us that he dies for us. His life will be cut down, strung up on a tree of death. But from the stump that remains, new life will grow. A world of peace, wolves now the playmates of lambs instead of their pursuers. A world, can you imagine, in which our children – all children – can play without fear, for there will simply be nothing left to be afraid of. In this peace, justice will blossom, putting the wicked powers of sin, death, and the devil to flight.
  6. We could not turn around on our own, let alone enact God's vision for us. So God does it all, in our stead and for our sake, through the Son, Jesus Christ. God's judgment reveals the cutoff stump you've made out of your own life, but *just there* is the good news: God, after all, does great work with tree stumps. In the risen Christ, your life begins to bloom anew. A shoot from a stump, growing skyward, drawn irresistibly by the warmth of the Son. Here is your repentance, as God makes you holy and righteous, slowly untangling your life. In this life, we can stop blaming our boots, walking faithfully now with Christ and blazing new paths for him into this world.
  7. The other day I was walking through Grace, and a spot of red caught my eye. Upon now-leafless branches in our Memorial Garden perched a cardinal. I

thought about how I was running from one thing to the next while this beautiful creature was smart enough to sit still, a sign of life in a barren spot. That may be good enough for us this Advent. To be signs of life amidst this dying world. To be visible citizens of the Peaceable Kingdom that has not yet come but one day will. To be still in the presence of Christ and, when we take wing, to fly finally in the right direction.

8. So repent, friends. Bear fruit. Untangle and grow. Live a life that bears witness to the defeat of death. Burn bright in this world that God has not abandoned, this world in which Christ is incarnate now through bread and wine, and through you and me, the Body of Christ. The tree that was chopped down and made into an ugly cross now stands beautiful, beckoning to the nations, Jesse's lineage come to fruition in the little child of Bethlehem. Gazing upon Jesus, we discover the blessing of which St. Paul writes, "May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit." Yes, may your lives be so full of the joy and peace of Christ that there is room for nothing else, so abundant that you overflow with a hope that blesses those around you. Amen.

And now may the peace that passes all human understanding keep your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, this day and forever. Amen.