

Redwoods Presbyterian Church  
Larkspur, California  
November 17, 2013

Matthew 3:1-12  
"Noel, Noel"

I am emphasizing poetry and scripture this Advent and Christmas season. Last week I quoted an excerpt from T. S. Eliot's "Journey of the Magi." This week it's the master of the lower case, e. e. cummings. His poem "little tree" is printed on an insert. Please follow along if you like when I read the poem, now.

### **little tree**

little tree  
little silent Christmas tree  
you are so little  
you are more like a flower

who found you in the green forest  
and were you very sorry to come away?  
see i will comfort you  
because you smell so sweetly

i will kiss your cool bark  
and hug you safe and tight  
just as your mother would,  
only don't be afraid

look the spangles  
that sleep all the year in a dark box  
dreaming of being taken out and allowed to shine,  
the balls the chains red and gold the fluffy threads,

put up your little arms  
and i'll give them all to you to hold  
every finger shall have its ring  
and there won't be a single place dark or unhappy

then when you're quite dressed  
you'll stand in the window for everyone to see  
and how they'll stare!  
oh but you'll be very proud

and my little sister and i will take hands  
and looking up at our beautiful tree

we'll dance and sing  
"Noel Noel"

The French word for "Noel" is Christmas. It has a lovely ring to it and that why our concert this afternoon with voice and bell choirs is called "Noel, Nowell, Noelle!"

It is lovely that e. e. cummings affirms the season in this beautiful poem but why would I begin this sermon with this poem when we have a fairly radical and strident gospel passage given us by the Revised Common Lectionary?

There's a reason why people, including the Pharisees and Sadducees, flocked to John when he baptized at the Jordan River proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near..." ...and people were baptized by him confessing their sins.

On seeing the religious and community leaders, John says unceremoniously, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

A humorous aside: I read an article in *The Christian Century* last week by a young pastor who liked John's alternative ministry, a kind of let's go into the wilderness and preach God's word. He suggested setting up church at a football stadium where tailgate parties are held. That's a good idea but can you imagine standing in the middle of a Raider Nation barbecue and beer-drinking party and shouting, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance." Debbie tells me it would be safer to shout "Go Raiders!" and then ease in to a meatier message. Besides, this pastor goes to them and not them to him, as is the case in John's story.

John proclaimed the coming of an empire profoundly different from the Roman Empire and the client kingdom of Herod Antipas. His message was similar to that of Second Isaiah during the exile following the first destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE.

The echoes of Isaiah 40:3 indicate that Matthew may be invoking the theme of new creation and new exodus so deeply embedded in Isaiah. Also for Matthew, the wilderness will be a place of both judgment and redemption. The wilderness in Israel's history is the place of renewal where the revelation of the Torah was given, and it was the place of judgment where a hard-hearted generation perished for lack of faith.

Since John strongly echoes these themes from Israel's past, the people flocked to him but there must have been a more compelling reason like a 911. Churches were full to the brim for weeks after 911. One of the tragic events in Matthew's time was the sacking and destruction of Jerusalem and the temple in

70 CE, which happened shortly before his gospel was written. That would have traumatized the Jews as much as they were traumatized during the first destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Also, Jews and Christians were horribly treated by a series of Roman leaders. The Roman procurator, Gessius Florus (64-66), openly plundered the land, robbed individuals, sacked towns, and took bribes.

Many self-respecting, covenant-keeping Jews perhaps see these tragic events as judgment of their sins and therefore find John's wilderness message compelling. They see in it salvation and hope for themselves and Israel, the restoration of Israel.

Now, back to e. e. cummings. The poem is written from the perspective of a child who personalizes the tree. The child in the poem wants to kiss and hug the tree. He speaks of its arms to be filled with Christmas ornaments.

There's a sense of the tree giving itself for the child and his family and the family giving to the tree for the splendor and beauty of Christmas. The poem has a sacred environmental ring. There's an intimate and synergistic relationship between humanity and nature.

The "brood of vipers" in this context would be the spoilers and destroyers of God's beautiful earth. They need to hear and respond to the kind of message that John proclaims. The San Francisco Chronicle had a cartoon on the op-ed page last Monday that suggests who these folk might be. You may not agree but it resonates.

The cartoonist Toles entitles his cartoon "History of the Climate Change Debate." He draws 16 boxes. In 14 boxes over time the same man says, "It's not real." In the 15<sup>th</sup> box he says, "It's...um..." In the 16<sup>th</sup> box he says, "It's too late."

David Korten, in his book, *When Corporations Rule the World*, says we have a threefold human crisis in our globe today: deepening poverty, social disintegration, and environmental destruction.

He writes: "Environmentally, although there have been important gains in selected localities in reducing air pollution and cleaning up polluted rivers, the deeper reality is one of a growing ecological crisis. The ever-present threat of nuclear holocaust has been replaced by the threat of increasing exposure to potentially deadly ultraviolet rays as the protective ozone layer thins. The younger generation worries whether they may be turned into environmental refugees by climate changes that threaten to melt the polar ice caps, flood vast coastal areas, and turn fertile agricultural areas into deserts." (p. 30-31)

Like 911, there may be a time when people realize it is too late, or absolutely at the midnight hour, and then turn to places of salvation and deep spirituality like the church to help them move closer God and to more God-like ways to care for God's earth before it's *really* too late.

John says to the Pharisees and Sadducees and others, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 'I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'"

John's response is a mixture of images of judgment (ax; cut down; thrown into the fire; winnowing fork; burn chaff) and hope (one more powerful than I; baptize with fire and Holy Spirit; gather wheat into God's granary). Fire relates to judgment and hope. The passage looks forward to the grand transition: the advent of a new age that can be reached only by finding a way through the wilderness and living through judgment and hope.

Advent means "coming." It's the coming of Jesus into the world as salvation and hope. It is Jesus coming daily into our lives to help us see the problems of the world and to show us the way, the truth and the life, and it's Jesus coming in the future to restore this world into the beautiful place God intended. We thank John the Baptist and e. e. cummings for preparing the way of the Lord.

"and my little sister and i will take hands/and looking up at our beautiful tree/we'll dance and sing/'Noel Noel'" Amen.