

**“Talking Heads”**  
**Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-3**  
**12/9/2018**

Seen any good bumper stickers lately? Most of you know that I enjoy a good joke and that good natured teasing is part of my learned behavior. My siblings and I, all ten of us, often engaged in teasing one another. Sometimes, as with all kids, the teasing went too far. We knew that point had been reached the second we heard the words: ***That will be enough of that. Whatever it is you said, it was not funny. Did you see your sister or brother laughing?*** The words brought us back to boundaries. If the words we said were hurtful, they were not deemed funny. My observation is that this simple lesson from childhood is either not being taught or not being followed. That seems clear when I think about some bumper stickers we have all seen in recent years. Many of them reflect a loss of respect for the opinions of others. There are way too many political ones of this nature. There are obscene ones that cause a shudder, especially knowing my grandkids and their friends, and other people's grandkids and friends, are seeing the same things. There are bullying words, threatening words, sexist words, homophobic words and so many more. All of them concern me. Whatever happened to sensitivity to the other person when choosing our words? I was going to make a list of some I've heard and some I've seen, but decided they were too offensive.

In and of themselves, they might be harmless. But somehow they speak to a pervasive mood. ***I can say anything I want. I care about me. You take care of yourself.*** They seem to lose sight of seeing others as part of the family. They speak of a "dog eat dog" world in a time of a diminishing sense of a common humanity. They speak to a time when ***We*** and ***They*** are prominent in our national and personal conversations. They are everywhere, at every level of our culture.

I studiously avoid the ***Talking Heads programs on television.*** They parade as panel discussions, usually centering around politics. They represent both spectrums of our two main political parties. From where I sit, there is very little discussion taking place on these programs. They are, more often than not, about pushing a specific agenda. While one "panelist" is waxing on about her or his stance, another often appears to be ready with a premeditated and predictable response. The question that drives me from these "discussions or debates" is that of "Is anyone listening?" I have to say that this response is not new. As far back as the 1980s and 1990s (if memory serves me right) I began to feel this way. It was in the days of ***Crossfire.*** Do any of you remember that? It was advertised as an open discussion. It pretended to be an intellectual airing of different views, which, in many ways, it was. But it

often appeared as an angry verbal confrontation. It was mild by today's standards, but often it had a confrontational air to it. The feeling was strong enough for me to stop watching. I chose instead to read several different news sources and to decide for myself how I understood the events of the day. These programs had, and have, a deep appeal in difficult and divided times, when culturally and individually we go inward rather than outward, when we are not sure we want to find a common meeting ground. No matter where you stand on any particular issue I think you might agree that healing any division begins when we listen to, and we hear the other's point of view.

Today's Scripture readings might cause us to stop and reflect on this divisiveness. Recall Isaiah's words, words which echo Jeremiah, from whom we heard last week, as we began our journey through Lent. They offer a new viewpoint for their troubled time.

***A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of Council and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.***

The words are jarring because they do not square with the reality we see. We hear them much as the Israelites did when Isaiah first spoke them. The prophet, just beginning his ministry, saw from a different perspective. He saw what God had in mind for them. Only recently returned from exile to their homeland, still chafing under a foreign ruler, still wondering how they could believe they were "God's chosen people," Isaiah comes to them with an amazing announcement of a different reality than their limited minds were seeing. A king would sit on David's throne, and with him, Israel's rightful status would be restored. Isaiah was aware of the crossfire in which Israel had found herself. She had experienced exile and oppression under both the Babylonians and the Assyrians. He had heard the talking heads all around him. Some had seen the inequities and taken them as proof that God was not Israel's benefactor. Others stubbornly held a different viewpoint, God would restore things to the way they once were. The talking heads were everywhere. Isaiah's voice might easily have been missed amidst the noise. Neither side had it correctly is his essential message, at least not entirely. He announced that the

restoration of Israel would come, but it would come with a king who would *refine* what it meant to be the people of God, *redefine* what it meant to be such people.

The longed for revenge against the enemy would not occur. The standard of justice would be turned on its head, legality would give way to justice as the measuring rod. And justice would no longer involve returning evil for evil, foul deed for foul deed. Justice would no longer be retributive, giving people what they deserved. Rather it would be restorative, giving people what they needed. It would set the system, as it were, on its head.

***He shall not judge by what his eyes see or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth....*** The coming king would call an end to the crossfire and move those within it to a place of safety. ***They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*** Even nature would no longer be at war. ***The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion together, and a little child shall lead them.***

What a surprise! Who could believe these words from Isaiah? Why would anyone believe them today? Who? Anyone who knows the present reality and senses that a God, whose other name is Love, could possibly want it to be.

Why? Because our experience of God, of a love that is eternal, cannot possibly see the present reality as right, cannot want war, poverty, discrimination, injustice, starvation, homelessness, and any discernible evil, and still call it good. That is why!

How then does God's reality, a world free of crossfire, of people and nations at peace, a place and time of righteousness and justice come to be?

***In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'*** How? By recognizing all is not as it should be, personally or communally, locally or nationally, or globally. Repenting, turning and going in a new direction is how it will happen. It requires living by God's standard of justice, rather than setting our own.

How do we escape the crossfire? What is required of us? We refuse to go along with unjust behavior at any level of our lives. We refuse to see anyone as other than sister or brother. We remember the prophet. ***What does the Lord require of us, but to do justice and to walk humbly with God?*** And so as we observe the second

Sunday of Advent, we hear the message of John the Baptist. ***Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*** Which means we feed the poor, clothe the naked, visit the sick, care for the dying, do acts of mercy and show compassion. In such a way, we respond to the voice of God, rather than the voice of the ***talking heads.***

Get out of the crossfire. ***Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight*** and in Jesus' words, ***Behold the kingdom of God.*** Amen.