

God's Not Finished Yet.
A sermon by Angie Witmer based on Isaiah 11:1-10
Sunday, December 5, 2010
Plymouth Congregational United Church of Christ

Have you ever stopped and wondered what day it was—you can't remember if it's Tuesday or Thursday because everything in life pretty much looks the same? You get up, walk the dog, eat breakfast, drink a cup of coffee, clean up, go to work, pick up groceries, fill the car up with gas, cook dinner, watch some TV, go to bed, read a few pages out of a book, shut off the light, go to sleep and wake up in the morning to do it all over again.

That's life. And when day after day after day after day looks the same, things can start to feel a little...well...blah. Gray. Dull. Lifeless.

Yeah. I've felt that way, too. It's not good. It's not good for the soul. Not at all.

So it's good to have moments and events in life that pull us out of our daily habits, that get us out of our heads, that connect us to one another, that connect us to God and remind us why we're here. That's why we worship around here on the weekends—this isn't just “one more thing” on our weekly checklist of things we have to do. This is the thing that gives life color. This is where we are reminded who we are and to whom we belong. And that we are wanted and loved and that our lives have

meaning regardless of whether everything is going just fine or going up in flames—God is with us. We have a job to do. Always. Period.

Having said that, though, I realize that there are times when things around here can start to feel a little ordinary, too. I hate to admit it, but I know it's true: doing the same thing week in and week out can start to feel routine. Maybe even a little blah.

Which is understandable, I suppose. Most of the church year is spent in Ordinary Time, after all. That's the biggest season of the year—and it feels, well, ordinary. Not in a bad way. Just ordinary. As in “this is life.” Stories. Prayers. Songs. There's a rhythm to it all. A familiarity. We go about life: we go to work, we walk the dog, we drink our coffee, we watch movies, we meet with friends and we worship. It's comfortable.

In the midst of all of the ordinariness, there are high holy days, too: times where we celebrate the big truths of our faith. Easter. Christmas. Pentecost.

Those are the “break out the good china and polish up the silver and bring out the brass” kinds of occasions. These are the times where we're most likely to invite our friends and relatives and co-workers to come and join in the fun because hey, let's face it—these times are fun.

But those high holy days happen here and there. It would be a little crazy-making and discombobulating to make our way through the church year with

“ordinary...ordinary...ordinary...ordinary...CHRISTMAS!...ordinary...ordinary...EASTER!”

So there are seasons in the year. Seasons aren't quite ordinary but aren't really big and flashy. Seasons in the church year are where we sort of do our ordinary routines and rituals, but add some other stuff in the mix, too, to shake things up, take a look at what this is all about, help us ponder the “why's” of it all and prepare for what's next. There's the season of Lent, when we get prepare ourselves for the spectacular truth of Easter. There's the season of Easter where we get ready for the Holy Spirit to set us on fire at Pentecost. And there's season of Advent—which is where we are right now, when we get ready for God to come into our lives and the world again. And again. And again. To make things new. To make things right.

You see, the world isn't yet what God had hoped for once upon a time when the world was created. We know it's true. Hope. Peace. Joy. Love. We catch glimpses of them here and there but overall...well...they are things that we yearn for and desire more than anything. At our core, deep in our souls, we know instinctively that these are the things that will make us whole. And we don't have them. Not yet, anyway.

So during Advent, we grieve a little. We recognize the brokenness in the world: from broken relationships to broken spirits to broken promises on a personal, communal and global level. And we mourn. But that's not all we do—we don't just sit around crying, getting bitter and cynical

about how hopeless things are. We remember. We remember that even in the midst of our brokenness, God enters in. God has not given up on us. Or the world. Something or someone is still coming...and there is hope. In Advent, we are asked to recognize no matter how hopeless or sad or hardened we feel about our lives or the state of the world—God isn't done yet.

Which is why we read stories like this one from Isaiah—it's a reminder of the truth that God does the most amazing things in the midst of the darkest times. When Isaiah shared these words thousands of years ago, he had some of the same longings that we do—he was grieving for families and friends and colleagues and probably even for himself and the world they were living in. His was a world at war—not war half-way around the world, but war right there in his own backyard and front yard and every other yard all around. It had been that way for generations: every kid at that time grew up with a weapon in hand and learned at an early age how to use it. It was “kill or be killed.” And Isaiah was tired of it. Sad about it. He longed for the world to be the way God intended the world to be: a place of peace where people would study war no more and lambs and leopards would be able to lie down together and little children would be able to stick their hands into a nest of snakes—all without anyone getting hurt or causing damage.

So he shared this vision—today's story—so that people wouldn't forget. So that he wouldn't forget. God had promised that there would be someone coming into the world—someone who would rise up out of

this madness and pain and hopelessness, someone who would be wise and understanding and mighty, someone who would be full of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, someone who would faithfully speak the truth and bring down the wicked.

You know why we tell this story during Advent, right? It's because we associate Jesus with this vision—we believe Jesus is that “someone” in Isaiah’s vision. After all, he was born during a pretty bleak time in the history of the Jewish people. He went a little crazy every now and then, too, breaking the rules and speaking up in public and in private for righteousness and justice. He talked to normal people about everyday things, pointing out along the way that God is in the midst of it all—the highs and the lows and the ordinary everyday in-between things, too. He pointed people in the ways of peace—not peace as in “everybody will just sit around and hold hands and sing Kum Ba Yah” but peace as in “yes, there will be some really painful, awful, crippling, unfair things that happen in your life but you can still be whole and integrated and live as though life is holy because it is.”

He did it. He gave everyone—including us—a glimpse of what it would be like if (as Isaiah said) “the earth was full of the knowledge of the Lord and no one would hurt or destroy in all of the earth.”

I have to admit: it all sounds a little “out there.” Cows and bears lying down together? A child leading the way? No sleeping with one eye open

looking out for the enemy? No anxiety about the future? No sense of “kill or be killed” mentality? It’s just not right. It’s not...normal.

And there’s some truth to that: it’s not normal. Not to most of us, anyway. We are so accustomed to living our days in fight or flight mode—our brains and bodies are so constantly full of anxiety and fear and dread—that we can’t begin to even entertain the idea that there may be another way. We barely notice anymore when the evening news anchors announce the current death toll statistics from the wars in the Middle East and we hardly think twice when presented the latest facts and figures about homelessness or hunger right here in Des Moines. Those things have become a part of life. That’s just the way things are.

Wow. How messed up is that? Somewhere, somehow, we got used to this. Numb, even. Gray. Blah. Dull. Lifeless. We are so steeped in this stress-filled, fear-based, life lived on high alert that we can’t see anymore that it’s not normal. It’s not even close to normal. Which is why we “do Advent”: to remind ourselves that the vision of new life rising up out of a dead old stump—out of the hopelessness of life—is as much for us as it was for Isaiah’s people. God has not forgotten us. No matter how bad things might seem, there is more truth and light to break forth. Righteousness is coming. Justice is coming. Peace is coming. The real ‘normal’ is on the way.

So get ready. Open up. Enter fully into this season of waiting and longing. Invite God in to those deep, dark places where your life feels

broken, where bitterness and cynicism have let you believe that there isn't any hope. Let God do God's thing in those hardened places so that new life might take root and grow in you, so you might feel hopeful again—you might feel alive again. Because there is a new day coming. And the promise that Advent offers—that the new day that's coming will be well worth the wait—is the truth. Thanks be to God.

Amen.