

Alvin Spitzer

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Ms. Taylor

A LITTLE CHILD SHALL LEAD THEM

Isaiah 11:1-10 & Matthew 3:1-12

A sermon preached by the Rev. Theodore S. Atkinson
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IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER AND OF THE SON AND OF THE HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN.

Picture in your mind an immense Christmas tree. Look at the strong heavy branches. Let it represent a royal family tree and each branch on the tree a king of Israel. The tree is rooted in Jesse, the father of King David, who lived over a 1000 years before the birth of Jesus. Jesse's family tree grew and sent out branches for 500 years. King David is the largest branch. But there are also branches for Solomon, Hezekiah, Josiah, Jehoshaphat and all the kings of Israel. Picture that tree, that family tree. Now blink your eyes and look again. The mighty royal family

tree has been chopped down. All you see is a sawed off stump. The stump represents what happened to David's family tree. It was chopped down by invading nations around 600 years before the birth of Jesus and it stopped producing kings. Now look down around the base of the

stump. A tender green shoot springs up. After 600 years there's still life in the roots. We thought the family tree had died out, but life springs up. Keep your eye on that shoot. Watch it grow into a Christmas tree more immense than you can imagine. The new shoot is a new king, a descendant of King David. Christians recognize the new shoot as Jesus Christ. *Reminds us that here is often referred to*

When, as a young man, Jesus preached his first sermon in Nazareth he choose a portion of this prophecy for his text for the day. He unrolled the scroll of Isaiah and found the place where it was written: "The spirit of the LORD is upon him." When he finished reading he said, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled." Later, when Jesus was baptized by John, the Spirit descended on him in the form of a dove. Jesus was given the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight was in the fear of the LORD. He judged the poor, and decided with equity for the meek. When Jesus was crucified a placard was placed over him, "The king of the Jews." Few

really believed he was a king. But a hand full of disciples began to proclaim Jesus as the king prophesied by Isaiah. The resurrection of Jesus convinced them that Jesus would one day usher in a kingdom rule by Jesus; a kingdom where nature would be reconciled with humankind.

One of the most remarkable features of Isaiah's prophecy ^{and of the ministry of Jesus were these} was his concern for children.

Isaiah prophesies a world safe for children. "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain." When Christians hear those words we remember how Jesus welcomed children after adults wanted to send them away because they were disrupting a worship service. We remember how he took little children in his arms and blessed them and said, "Of such is the kingdom of God." We remember how Jesus warned people who hurt, molest and lead children astray that it would be better for them to have a heavy millstone wrapped around their necks and thrown into the deepest sea rather than to face God's judgment.

Isaiah's prophecy has captured the imagination of artists

Edward Hicks was one of nineteenth century America's foremost folk artists. His favorite subject for artistic expression was Isaiah 11:1-10. Like many preachers who have only one sermon, Hicks had only one subject. Some of you may be familiar with one of the many versions of "Peaceable Kingdom." Hicks depicts the domestic animals named in the scriptural verse--a lamb, a goat, and a calf--reposing contentedly with their natural predators. A child leads them with an arm resting casually on the lion's mane.

Can Hicks's portraits ever come true? Will the prophesy of Isaiah ever be fulfilled? Will Jesus ever usher in a kingdom of peace. We pray every Sunday for Christ's kingdom to come but I wonder if we really mean it. I wonder if we understand ^{that we're preparing for Jesus' kingdom to be fulfilled} what we're praying for. Are we willing to prepare ourselves for Christ's kingdom? We have a tendency to think of the kingdom of God as some vague realm way off in heaven. But I pray for God's kingdom to come to earth. Advent

is a time we look forward and prepare for the coming of Christ's kingdom. So how do we prepare for Christ's kingdom? What if we were to put as much effort, imagination, money, and energy into preparing for the inauguration of Christ's kingdom as we do for Christmas?

We have a lot of experience in preparing for Christmas but how do we prepare for Christ's kingdom? John the Baptist points the way when he proclaims, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." We prepare for Christ's kingdom when we accept the gift of repentance - the gift of turning around and acknowledging our need for God's help, of confessing our sin and then being able to start afresh. We can get discouraged if we try to repent all at once of everything in our lives that we need to repent of. Repentance begins in small ways. In *The Essential Calvin and Hobbes*, Calvin says to Hobbes, "I feel bad that I called Susie names and hurt her feelings. I'm sorry I did it".

Pots & Pans

"Maybe you should apologize to her," Hobbes suggests.

Calvin ponders this for a moment and then replies, "I keep hoping there's a less obvious solution."

We're often tempted to avoid the obvious solution.

I recently read something a parent wrote to one of her little children. What she writes comes across to me as expression of true repentance which might help us prepare for Christ's kingdom where children will be safe. She writes, "Just for this morning I'm going to step over the laundry, pick you up, and take you to the park. Just for this afternoon, I will unplug the telephone and keep the computer off while I sit with you in the backyard and blow bubbles. Just for this evening I will hold you in my arms and tell you a story about how you were born and how much I love you. I will think about mothers and fathers who are in hospital rooms watching their children suffer senselessly and screaming inside because they can't handle it anymore, mothers and fathers who are searching for their missing children, mothers and fathers who are visiting their children's graves instead of their bedrooms. And when I kiss you goodnight I will

hold you tighter a little longer. And I will pray for that day when every child is wanted, every child is loved, every child is safe.

In closing I encourage all of us to pray for our children. Jim Sumner, our DCE, has asked me to encourage you to become a secret prayer partner for our children. ^{narthex} Pick up the name of a prayer partner in the narthex after the service. Pray daily for the child throughout 2002. Pray about any "big deal" events happening in your ~~prayer~~ secret prayer partner's life. Drop an anonymous note to them as a congratulations or condolence as the need may arise. Keep your anonymity and don't send gifts. Just pray for one child. Pray for a world safe for children. Pray for Christ's kingdom to come to earth soon.

Amen