

December 7, 2025

Isaiah 11:1–10, Matthew 3:1-12

Rev. Carrie Winebrenner

“Oh, Shoot!”

Gospel Reading: Matthew 3:1-12, CEB

In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the desert of Judea, announcing,  
<sup>2</sup>“Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!” <sup>3</sup>He was the one of whom Isaiah the prophet spoke when he said:

*The voice of one shouting in the wilderness,  
“Prepare the way for the Lord;  
make his paths straight.”*

<sup>4</sup> John wore clothes made of camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist. He ate locusts and wild honey.

<sup>5</sup> People from Jerusalem, throughout Judea, and all around the Jordan River came to him. <sup>6</sup> As they confessed their sins, he baptized them in the Jordan River. <sup>7</sup> Many Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by John. He said to them, “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the angry judgment that is coming soon?”

<sup>8</sup> Produce fruit that shows you have changed your hearts and lives. <sup>9</sup> And don’t even think about saying to yourselves, Abraham is our father. I tell you that God is able to raise up Abraham’s children from these stones. <sup>10</sup> The ax is already at the root of the trees. Therefore, every tree that doesn’t produce good fruit will be chopped down and tossed into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> I baptize with water those of you who have changed your hearts and lives. The one who is coming after me is stronger than I am. I’m not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire. <sup>12</sup> The shovel he uses to sift the wheat from the husks is in his hands. He will clean out his threshing area and bring the wheat into his barn. But he will burn the husks with a fire that can’t be put out.”

This is the Word of the Lord. **Thanks be to God.**

A couple of weeks ago, I was out in my front yard doing the glamorous job of taking down Halloween decorations. The pumpkins were starting to look tired, the skeletons kept falling over, and the leaves had that unmistakable “it’s time for winter” energy.

And right in the middle of all that November-ness...I saw it.

A blossom.

On my apple tree.

In *late fall*.

My tree was clearly confused...but it was also insistent.

It had something to offer, something to bear, even when the rest of the world said it shouldn’t.

And I stood there, giggling with camera in hand because “photos or it didn’t happen.” I was literally talking to the tree...“Silly goose. Why are you blooming now? You’re out of season.”

But after sharing it in my family group chat, it occurred to me... “Oh, shoot. This is what hope looks like. This is what God does. Now who’s the silly goose?”

Isaiah gives us a similar scene.

Not a healthy tree. Not a thriving orchard. Not a well-watered garden.

A stump.

A stump is what’s left after life has been cut down, cut back, worn out, or simply come to what looks like an end.

But Isaiah says: v “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.*”

A tiny green sign of life from something assumed done. Over. Finished.

Isaiah doesn’t say:

“A shoot will spring when conditions are ideal.”

“A shoot will appear when everything is calm.”

“A shoot will grow when the world gets its act together.”

No. The shoot grows in a season that *should not* produce life. Just like an apple blossom in November.

We often imagine peace as:

- everything quiet
- everything stable
- everything conflict-free
- everything predictable

But the Bible is far more honest than that.

Rev. Dr. Barbara Lundblad, biblical scholar, preacher, and professor at Union Theological Seminary, points out something easy to forget when we read such a poetic passage: when Isaiah spoke these words, the people weren't living in peace. They were living “in a time of terror, oppression, and uncertainty.”<sup>1</sup> They had been cut down, scattered, frightened. And it is *into that wreckage* that Isaiah dares to speak of a shoot...a tiny, stubborn sign of hope.

Which means Isaiah isn't giving us a picture of peace after the conflict ends. He is giving us peace *right in the wreckage*...peace that arrives before anything is fixed. God showing up not when the world calms down, but when the world is at its worst.

That was true for ancient Israel.

It was true in Matthew's day as John the Baptist cried out in a wilderness full of fear.

And it is true for us, now...in our own world of violence, heartbreak, exhaustion, and uncertainty.

Which is why prophets like Isaiah and John... keep reminding us: “Oh, shoot! Life isn't great right now, but something new is coming. Take heart. Breathe. Trust in Emmanuel - God *with* us.”

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<sup>1</sup> [Commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10 - Working Preacher from Luther Seminary](#)

Isaiah's peace comes *into* a world that is fractured and fearful.  
Jesus is born *into* a world of political tension, danger, and upheaval.

So maybe ... Peace isn't the absence of conflict — **peace is the presence of God.**

Peace is the shoot. The sprout, the blossom that appears long before conditions are right.

Maybe peace looks like something small, stubborn, holy, quietly insisting:  
“I am here. God is here. Life is still possible.”

Today, we bless someone who understands this better than most...our beloved  
Parish Associate for Pastoral Care, Ann Pitman.

I assure you, there were many “Oh, shoot” moments when she announced it was time. You see, this is her second retirement... and as she says, “this one will stick.” We shall see. Because God has a way of surprising us with shoots from familiar roots.

Ann stepped into ministry with us at a moment when the church, and the world, felt like a stump: trimmed down, stretched thin, uncertain of what might come next.

And yet here she came, gentle and strong, tending, visiting, praying, nurturing.  
A blossom among us.

God loves giving us just what we need before we even know it. Just like our lectionary texts for today...the right texts at just the right time. Just as Isaiah tells us that a beautiful life will grow from dormant roots, Matthew gives us John the Baptist: that wild, camel-hair-wearing prophet calling out from the wilderness, *“Prepare the way of the Lord!”*

John wasn't polished or poetic. He wasn't quiet. He wasn't what anyone expected. But he *was* faithful. Faithful in helping people turn toward God. Faithful in making space for Christ's love long before Jesus arrived on the scene.

This should sound familiar, because Ann has spent more than 32 years doing the very thing John did: preparing the way...not loudly, but lovingly; not with force, but with faithfulness.

Not with locusts and honey, thank goodness. Not with shouting. Not with fire and brimstone.

But with pastoral presence. With prayer. With compassion that shows up in hospital rooms, living rooms, nursing homes, staff meetings, and quiet corners where no one else sees the work.

If Isaiah gives us a shoot...

and John gives us a path...

then Ann has been both in the life of every church she has served...from Greenfield, Plainfield, Greensburg, Sullivan, University City, Collinsville, Ashland, and Fort Wayne.

A shoot...bringing new life to places that felt cut down.

A path-preparer...helping people turn their hearts toward the peace only Christ can give.

Her ministry has been a living sermon of John's message: *"Prepare your hearts. Make room. Christ is near."*

Ann, we are so blessed and grateful that you have done this faithfully, tenderly, beautifully for more than three decades.

Your ministry has been one of presence; that quiet peace Isaiah imagines: not conflict-free days, but God-filled days.

As you step into this next chapter, I have this deep sense that you, too, are about to discover an unexpected bloom. A new shoot. Something beautiful and holy that God is already growing.

Retirement, after all, is just another season. And the apple tree is proof that God loves to bring blossoms in unexpected seasons.

Friends, Isaiah's vision wasn't just for ancient Israel. It's for us. For anyone who has felt cut down. For anyone who is entering a new chapter. For anyone who wonders if peace is possible in a world like ours.

God is still growing shoots.

Still making beauty appear out of season.

Still bringing peace...not because life is calm, but because God is present.

Peace is not the world settling down; peace is God settling in.

So now, every time I look out the front window, I am grateful for that silly goose apple tree, moving me from “Oh, shoot” to “Oh...A shoot!”

Small. Steady. Insistent.

A tiny sermon all its own.

May we become people who notice blossoms. People who nurture shoots. People who trust that God is already growing peace among us...right here, right now, even in seasons that feel all wrong.

And today, as we bless you, Ann, may we bless you with that same hope: that God is with you,

God goes before you, and God is already preparing your next beautiful, out-of-season bloom.

Let us pray. *Holy God, You are the One who brings blossoms out of season and shoots from stumps we thought were long dead. You meet us not when life is calm, but right in the middle of our chaos, planting hope that quietly says, “I am here.”*

*Teach us to trust that peace is not the world settling down, but You settling in.*

*Open our eyes to notice the shoots You are growing, right here, right now. And make us people who welcome Your peace wherever it appears.*

*In the name of Emmanuel, God with us, we pray. Amen.*