

**Prepare the Way****Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12***Ute Molitor, First Congregational Church UCC, Camden, December 8, 2019*

Have you ever heard of Krampuses? They were recently featured in a news cast about an Advent/Christmas tradition in Austria. Krampuses are people who dress up like beastly folklore creatures with huge goat-like heads, long horns, long tongues, and wild eyes. In the olden days, they were used to scare children into behaving. They sometimes carry chains or whips made of reeds and make a lot of noise. I had a unique encounter with “them” at a hostel in Salzburg not too long ago. They first appeared at a cultural education session at the hostel for anyone who was interested. That was fine. However, they also made an unannounced appearance in all the rooms late at night. Many unsuspecting travelers had no idea who they were. We were all in bed when the door suddenly opened and some people dressed as Krampuses walked into the tiny room to scare us half to death. They nearly succeeded with an Asian roommate who was so frightened that she stayed with her head under her blanket and had to elevate her legs to get over the shock. Talk about putting fear into people!

John the Baptist was also good at creating shock value but not for personal kicks. He was serious. John dressed in a camel’s hair outfit and lived on locust and honey instead of indulging in rich food. John was expecting the coming of the Messiah (the Hebrew word for Christ) at any time and was trying to purify himself in an earnest way. He called on all to take a good long look at their own lives and repent. To repent literally means to turn your mind around and start living in a new way. This is an important theme in Advent. However, there are many different ways to imagine what is really being asked of us and what the expected Messiah is coming to accomplish.

John expected Christ to come and judge people before setting up his new realm. He used the image of Christ gathering and rejecting people as a farmer would gather in good wheat at the time of harvest and throw the chaff into an unquenchable fire (Matthew 3:12). A lot of people were listening to John and lined up to undergo a

purifying ritual of baptism. Baptism signified ritually dying to an old way of being and rising to a new life. There were some folks in the crowd whom John might have liked scare with some Krampus action but had to rely on the sharpness of his tongue instead: *“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? (Matthew 3:7).”* He was going after religious elites of his day who controlled peoples’ access to God through temple rituals and the observance of the law.

Some of them had actually dared get in the line for baptism and John was struggling to find some compassion for them.<sup>1</sup> John further challenged them by saying: *“Do not presume to say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our ancestor’; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe 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 (Matthew 3:9).”* In other words, these Sadducees and Pharisees couldn’t count on their religious background and status for favor with God.

John was an important “Wake up, people!” herald for the coming of Christ. However, as we will hear in next week’s text, John’s vision was still limited, most likely because of the intensity of his own judgment. Like Jesus Christ, John pushed the envelope around who belonged but he was more judgmental around who was redeemable and what God expected of us than Jesus. John was missing the subversive tenderness that is at the heart of the incarnation of God as a vulnerable human being. In the Christ child, God first enters the world as an unprivileged infant, born to teach us the true power of love – even the love of our enemies.

Parts of our text from the prophet Isaiah already envision the unifying, non-dualistic aspects of the incarnation. Isaiah was speaking to people expecting a new saving king in his own day and offers a peaceful vision to people suffering in exile at the time. Christians usually read Isaiah as foretelling the birth of Christ. The overall emphasis in

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps, he had a bit of Jonah’s spirit in him who couldn’t stand the fact that people he despised might actually get a chance to turn their lives around.

the text is on transcending old enemy lines and subverting power of one over another into a new way of being in relationship. *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them (Isaiah 11:6).” “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11: 9).”* Add to that, ‘Krampuses and unsuspecting tourists will sip Austrian eggnog together!’

I would like to tell you a (fictional) story of how one doctor had to find a way to make the path straight for Christ’s peaceable KINdom in an untenable situation that pitted her against an enemy.<sup>2</sup> Imagine that two ambulances have just crashed into each other in front of an emergency room entrance at a big city hospital. Both patients and EMT’s have sustained injuries and the ER personnel are trying to do triage. One EMT, become patient, has intense abdominal pain but refuses to be seen by the African-American female surgeon who checks on him. He demands a male doctor. When the chief surgeon who is also African-American comes in, the man remains agitated and insists on seeing someone else.

Finally, a white resident doctor comes in but she is shocked when she examines the patient. He has a huge swastika<sup>3</sup>, a symbol of hate and white supremacy, tattooed across his abdomen. This white resident lost family members in the Nazi Holocaust. When she tries to walk away, the first black doctor confronts her and tells her that they both have a job to do and will have to find a way to rise above. As it is becoming clearer that the EMT needs surgery, he also becomes insistent on having a white man in the operating room as a witness. He is terrified that he won’t get good care because of his views. The black doctor asks a white male colleague to witness but he is resistant to the request. She tells him forcefully: “Don’t you cross me while I am trying to rise above. Just don’t cross me now. I am trying to rise above and I need you in there!” The

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<sup>2</sup> This comes from a weekly TV show (Grey’s Anatomy) but I cannot remember the name of the episode.

<sup>3</sup> Usually a symbol of Nazi power, though a positive symbol in some cultures from which it was borrowed.

colleague tells her that she can refuse to do this but she replies, “I know I can but that would make me like him. I can’t become like him.”

They proceed to the surgery. When she gets ready to make a cut with the scalpel right across the swastika, she pauses for some time. Her white colleague starts to talk with her but she says, “Look, just be quiet right now. I am calling on Jesus here. I don’t do that very often but I am calling on Jesus right now.” She is calling on Jesus who is the shoot that has come forth from the stump of Jesse, as we hear in the text from Isaiah today. He has the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel, might and true knowledge (Isaiah 11:2).

By connecting with his Spirit, the black doctor finds the strength and might to put her own anger and judgment aside. She makes the well-being of a suffering human being her utmost concern. She is calling on Jesus to help her not reenact the very hatred and violence of racism that has caused her and countless other people harm. She even listens to the underlying fear in her patient that unmasks the lie of supremacy. She has been filled with the knowledge of God. The EMT, who may have thought of himself as somehow superior, has to face his fear and begin to surrender, in however flawed a fashion he chose, to the care of one he feared and despised.

Clearly, they still had a way to go toward the peaceable kingdom but they started to make the path straight. The doctor’s courage and wisdom of calling on a higher power to guide and strengthen her did the heavy lifting. Our nation still suffers from the lies of supremacy and racism. We reel from the deep hurt and distrust in our political discourse and need to be aware of how we participate and contribute to digging the holes even deeper. More often than not, we even end up righteously dismissing and judging each other to the point that we cannot listen for the underlying stories that shape us. There are rifts among family members. There are also rifts within ourselves as we dismiss and demean ourselves amidst our struggles.

Advent is a time to get realigned and turned around from the real hurts and suffering we inflict. It is indeed good to take nothing for granted, as John admonishes. We should not think that attending church, having a certain skin color or bank account or degree gives us a VIP member ticket to God's private salvation club. There is no such thing or place. There is "only" the infinity of God's love that embraces us even in our waywardness. Advent invites us to name and face our shadows and ask for God's help. It also invites us into a deeper trust in God's presence and power to lead us into a deeper peace, a greater love, and a broader horizon. As we journey toward the manger in Bethlehem, let us do so with grateful hearts for our God who meets us in the midst of our beautiful and troubled lives and still rises above our fears. Amen.