

Holy fishes: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

by [Frederick A. Niedner](#) in the [November 30, 2004](#) issue

Isaiah and the Baptizer conspire to give us animal dreams in this dark season of Advent. The earlier prophet's vision warms our hearts. Who among us hasn't yearned for a world in which lambs could hang out with wolves and adders behave as though Mr. Rogers had taught them how to play with children? A strange political critter appears in the dream as well, one that's not the puppet of pollsters and the powerful, but a leader with the heart and Spirit of God. (Which is more preposterous, lions eating grass or politicians looking out for something other than their own advancement?)

We love to dream of the promised land. In Advent, however, we tread the wilderness, out where fiery John induces nightmares. "You're nothing but a bunch of snakes slithering fast as you can from a grass fire," he accuses. John also promises new leadership, but the one he announces sounds more like the grim reaper than someone with plans for a kinder, gentler world.

John's alarming forecast has the look of a scenario known to many who grew up in corn-growing country. Every fall the harvested ears went temporarily into "corn cribs" of various shapes and sizes. Later in winter or spring came the time to empty the crib into a noisy shelling machine that spat out cobs and made cracked feed of the kernels. Shoveling out a crib proved a hard day's work, but the end always brought excitement.

When only a foot or two of ears remained in the bottom, dogs and cats began to circle the area. Shortly thereafter, the congregation of mice and sometimes a few rats who'd lived comfortably in this fleshpot would make their break. The cats did not invite the mice to play. Carnage and judgment ensued.

We endure such rhythms of exposure all our lives. Back in school, the report card laid bare our failures. The procrastination, cheating and lying we do later on in the "real world" often get overlooked, but when they don't we bleed rivers of shame. Watch us watch our children at play on some ball field or gym floor, and it's plain to see who's really getting judged. Whose kid is *that*? Later on, as those children bury

us, they listen respectfully, even forgivingly, to the eulogies, but if all the deeds of our lives were heaved from the granary floor of the one from whom no secrets are hid, much of what we've done would fly away like so much dryer lint.

Such a fate had befallen Isaiah's people. Sharp-toothed Babylonians circled, and with axes they chopped down the tree of David. But a shoot grows from the stump, as the prophet promises. In this one we may hope. When he comes, he's girded with righteousness, all right, and he sides with the meek, but he does not smite the earth nor slay the wicked with his breath. Instead, he appears himself as a defendant on the high priest's threshing floor. His life is tossed in the air before the gale of fickle crowds and public opinion. The ax is quickly laid to the root once more, and the shoot dies, fixed with nails to the dry, barren tree that stands where all our good intentions have crashed and burned.

But that ugly stump, a shameful thing of wicked judgment, becomes the shape of our hope and good news. Upon it Jesus joins us in the wilderness and takes as his own the depths of our emptiness. He'd asked no reward for taking this plunge, but he got one anyway. The title above his head might well have named him, "King of the Dead." Yes, he got us for his prize.

One more surprise remained. "God can make children from stones if God wants," John shouted. He meant it as warning, but it became promise. God could also harvest rich fruit from dead branches of a fallen tree, and did exactly that when Jesus ended up dead as dust and gravel.

We live by the promise that God will raise us too—not only some day when we die the big death, but today, in our dead-as-a-rock-in-the-wilderness despair, loneliness, fear or shame.

How do rocks like us come alive? Isaiah explains: "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea." In short, we'll know God the way husbands and wives know each other after long years of marriage. Indeed, that intimate knowledge will fill the earth like water covers the sea, and we who walk the earth will breathe knowledge of God the way fish breathe water.

Drowned in the baptismal flood, we breathe the Spirit of the Crucified. Thus do the dead live. This explains why we now hear music in the wilderness. It comes as part of yet another animal dream, though this one is God's dream come true. When my sister and I were children, one of our favorite images came from a hymn that began:

Lord, dismiss us with your blessing,  
Fill our hearts with joy and peace;  
Let us each, your love possessing,  
Triumph in redeeming grace.  
Holy fishes, holy fishes,  
Trav'ling through this wilderness.

Not until I learned to read did I realize the adults had not been singing of holy fishes, but, "O refresh us, O refresh us . . ." How dull and unimaginative. How adult!

For many years I grudgingly adopted the printed text. Thankfully, however, I eventually discovered Isaiah's promise that we'd be transformed and become fish in the sea of knowing God. Now we can sing of—and be—amazing, miraculous, wilderness-traveling "holy fishes" every chance we get.

In the wilderness, prepare a way! God has raised up children from stones. Swim along, singing!