My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. Our Lord God of our grateful hearts, minds, Spirits, and souls, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in your sight, our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

Last week we talked about defining our journey, and understanding that we have thought about our place in the world as a nation, as a church, and as community. What did we see? Did we ask the hard questions needed to understand our Advent journey? Do we even know that we need to ask questions in order to seek and find on the journey ahead? What journey do we think we’re on, after all? Is it one of triumph, humility, repentance, grace, ascendancy, mastery, or attention? What are the messages that are brought to us from that great prophet John the Baptist, and what do he and Isaiah have to say?

They both use the term “fear”.

There are plenty of reasons to be fearful these days—we don’t need anyone’s help to fan the flames of fear. Studies show us that lots of middle-class Americans, when faced with a $600 medical bill or car repair, would not be able to pay it. Nearly half of Americans would have trouble finding $400 in a crisis. And a crisis is something that we think of as threatening our family in an existential way, not just an ordinary thing.

Crisis is when we lose a job with no others on the horizon and we can’t feed our family. Crisis is when a child is ill and needs specialized care at a pediatric unit that the nearest hospital closed last year. Crisis is when we don’t share our anxieties with one another, and the world crashes so hard and suddenly on a family unit that it cannot bear the burden alone and the resultant divorce compounds the crisis.

Fear, uncertainty and helplessness leads to a preference for blaming and demonizing others as the source of our insecurity, because it’s all too much for us in the first place. We cannot see that we can quite easily end up in crisis at some point in our adult lives. Cut off from the tenets of what we have been taught as success, we have to figure out how this happened. How did the tree that we thought was so healthy and about to give fruit suddenly fall in even the mildest of storms? (Metaphorically, of course). Now we’re facing a fallen tree on the ground, realizing that we were not careful in understanding those things that can damage healthy wood from below the bark. Our past is drying up on the ground as the leaves and fruit whither next to a drying stump.

It’s easy to become vulnerable to feelings of helplessness and hopelessness. But it is equally hard to understand our part in all of this. Fortunately, reality is not up to us. Whether we are ordinary citizens or candidates for public office, ***we*** do not define reality. If there’s anything we need to be reminded of time and time again, it is that *there is something larger* than us; it’s bigger than us. It’s why we gather here each week.

We read the Bible for many reasons—for wisdom and counsel, for knowledge, for poetry and stories and the ability to see things in glorious metaphor. But most of all, I’d like to think that we read the Bible to be reminded that each of us, many of us, and collectively, all of us, should stop trying to think and act like we’re God.

The Bible is rich with descriptive language for God. God, like the wind, is unpredictable and beyond human control and management. According to Isaiah, God’s spirit intrudes on our present reality and disrupts it—offering new and daring possibilities. “The poet refers to God’s life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind,” says Walter Brueggemann, “which can create an utter newness.” The wind blows over the stump and creates new possibilities.

And the Bible uses the word fear not just in the sense of being afraid, frightened, and scared. To “fear God” in the Bible is the more important sense of awe and reverence which can be defined as a sense that there is something larger than a human being, accompanied by capacities for awe, respect, and shame.

This week’s Gospel text introduces John the Baptist, who bursts onto the scene preaching repentance. Because of the strange description of how wild John is, we are tempted to dismiss him a bit too quickly. John does not fit the norm of how we picture ordinary people. Like so many other people, he is subject to our prejudicial dismissal. So in appearance as well as in word, John the Baptist preaches repentance—a command to re-orient ourselves, to turn from our former ways, to change our attitude and perceptions. And those whose hearts do not change, who lack integrity and character, John indicts as a “brood of vipers,” challenging them to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” This is a command to act out of awe and reverence instead of being afraid.

Reverence begins with a deep understanding of our own limitations. Isaiah’s vision of the peaceful kingdom only looks like an impossible dream from the perspective of the arrogant, those who rely solely on themselves and refuse to listen to anyone else. When we rely only on us, we can very easily fall into a crisis mentality, and then we look to understand ourselves through others’ failures. That’s not reverence, that’s hubris, only allowing ourselves as having the answers, with the rest of the world as a dried-out plant, a dead stump.

But God is the God of ***all*** peoples. God sees the potential for shoots and branches, new life beginning in ways that have yet to unfold. In our time, they remain mere shoots and branches; much unfinished work remains to be done.

I’ll leave you with these final thoughts.

When I first got out of college I was an insurance adjuster and saw first-hand what crisis does not just to family units, but to entire communities. Blame is the first impulse, but it’s not a helpful one. In the aftermath of an earthquake, wildfire, tornado, or hurricane there’s only the tree which has been cut off, the past lying all around us but no way to build it back.

Reverence is needed. We require help from one another because we cannot do this alone. We need help from folks who understand there are no jobs or schools or anything to which to return. But from a stump that has been cut off, new life can emerge. It takes work. And it takes time. But with that new life, we can reimagine everything. We can lose our crisis mentality with one another and with the blame-game systems in which we have been accustomed, measured only by achievement.

We can figure out that in the dislocation around us, we can start newer and more faithfully. That’s different than bigger and better. But it’s more centered on hope and love, and it points us away from crisis to joy and peace. And for that, thanks be to God, Amen.