



## HOMILY

**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 11:1-10; MATTHEW 3:1-12**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**Sunday, December 4, 2022, Second Sunday of Advent**  
The Rev. Dr. Marcia Whitney Mount Shoop, Pastor

### **Isaiah 11: 1-10**

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; With righteousness he shall decide with equity for the meek of the earth.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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 cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

### **Matthew 3: 1-12**

3:1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 3:2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3:3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 3:4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 3:5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 3:6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 3:7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 3:8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 3:9 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. 3:10 Even now the ax 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. 3:11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He

will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 3:12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The Word of the LORD.

**Thanks be to God.**

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Please repeat after me:

I see myself in joy and love (repeat)

I know myself, I am enough (repeat)

Try it again this time with me:

I see myself in joy and love

I know myself, I am enough

**Play Song for 1:20 and turn down volumes gradually at the end until the congregation is singing acapella. Song Title: I Am Enough, by The Beautiful Chorus**

*(Heather: I emailed the file to you. Here it is on YouTube just in case you need it from there:  
<https://youtu.be/00pHRHvbXz0> )*

Beautiful!

Theology and the biblical witness tell us many things about God's love and our capacity to receive it and share it. There is one word that is not in the Bible though, and it's one we are going to use to free up the power of the peaceable kingdom and of John the Baptist's call to repent. That word is NEUROPLASTICITY.

**(put up neuroplasticity image: split screen on youtube live feed and full screen in the sanctuary. Sent email of the image)**

"Neuroplasticity is the brain's ability to change and adapt. [The Brain] has the capacity to change, reorganize, or grow neural networks. This [capacity] can involve functional changes due to [damage to the brain] or structural changes due to learning. Plasticity refers to the brain's malleability or ability to change; it does not imply that the brain is plastic.

Neuro refers to neurons, the nerve cells that are the building blocks of the brain and nervous system. Thus, neuroplasticity allows nerve cells to change or adjust.”<sup>1</sup>

**(Take the brain image down)**

Neuroplasticity can be impacted in terms of limitations by things like trauma and PTSD, injury, disease, substance use. And it can be impacted positively by things like adequate sleep, exercise, and playfulness. These things help your brain to be more malleable and open to learning and change and healing and new possibilities.

**(show cover images side by side)**

Sarah Peyton, a neuroscience educator and healer and author of “Your Resonant Self” and “Affirmations for Turbulent Times” works with the newest brain research to explore how what we are learning about the brain tells us about human beings and relationships and what that information gives us in terms of leverage and clues for practices that can heal us from trauma and help us be healthier in relationship. She says she is “making your brain a kinder place to live.”

**(take image down)**

We are viscerally, cellularly connected to other humans. How other people are doing around us deeply impacts how we are doing. Brain science tells us that we sync up in our bodies when we are around each other without any effort—when we watch the same TV show, when we listen to the same speaker. Right now, this room is full of neuro-receptor activity, with embodied syncing—like devices syncing and uploading and downloading shared information, we are syncing with each other right now.

We are community beings. But we’ve all had difficult experiences in human communities so we are skeptical about how good this syncing can be for us.

But the truth that brain science tells us is that we become more truly ourselves when we are in communities where there is an atmosphere of warmth and connection. When we are in communities where there is warmth and connection, we experience the most conducive atmosphere for us to be ourselves.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.verywellmind.com/what-is-brain-plasticity-2794886>

The experience of being really liked is transformative. The attachment system that is wired into us needs to feel that we matter. When we don't get that visceral download enough, that we matter, it impacts how we understand ourselves and how we move in the world.

Can you turn to your neighbor and say "You matter. I am so glad you are here." (moment for people to do it.)

Now these are words—and our bodies pick up on more than words.

Our systems are syncing right now to words, to facial expressions, to energy, to any experiences of resonance and disequilibrium. Sometimes we hear words, but they don't resonate with what we are feeling—for lots of reasons. A lot of it is because there is a lot of fight/flight/freeze activation when humans get together—the part of our nervous system that is trying to protect us.

But interestingly enough one of the biggest barriers in believing we matter and that we can trust spaces is not necessarily other people, but the ways we talk to ourselves about other people—our inner voices are often the harshest—that inner critic that is trying to protect us from all kinds of things—like harm, disappointment, betrayal, sadness, loss, danger.

There are lots of reasons why it is difficult to truly believe that we matter and that we can trust our surroundings. We all have a longing to be loved for who we are, but we have very few spaces where we can truly be ourselves. And we are interacting with others who are also navigating their own inner messaging systems and alarm bells, and who are not being warm to themselves either.

We all need someone to have a warmth of curiosity towards us—the thing is it can be hard to receive when we don't have that warm curiosity toward ourselves.

Can we say that to ourselves "I am glad that you are here. You matter." Let's try that.

When we have a sense of not being under threat from one another, when we sense safety, when we say to ourselves, "I am safe, I matter," that is when we experience true welcome. Sarah Peyton calls this the "neuroception of welcome."

When our nervous system senses that we are welcome, that moves our nervous system out of fight/flight and what Peyton calls "alarmed aloneness" and we move into an experience of being more truly ourselves.

Warm relationships, warm experiences of welcome impact our immune system—“red blood cells pick up more oxygen, carry a message to our whole bodies” of aliveness, our brain doesn’t have to work on threat so we can be more creative, muscles of the middle ear [begin to tune in more keenly] to the sound range of the human voice, our face becomes more mobile, and more depending on the unique ways each of our bodies function.

Our brains are changed by warm curiosity toward ourselves and each other. The warmth of beloved community can act almost like a collective hippocampus for us. The hippocampus is the brain’s organ that contextualizes things, puts things into perspective around time, place, experience. The hippocampus helps us to make meaning, and have perspective.

Trauma short circuits the hippocampus and does a stress hormone override. That override comes from the work of another part of our brains, the amygdala. When the hippocampus is short circuited by the cortisol reaction put into motion by the amygdala, our brains can’t place things in context and can’t make meaning out of things the same way.

When we experience enough resonance—enough compassion, curiosity, and warmth toward us (from ourselves and from others) the amygdala can relax and we can start to put things in context, our hippocampus can function again.

An embedded sense of “alarmed aloneness” is something we all have, and without us extending a warm curiosity toward ourselves, this alarmed aloneness can keep us in a persistent state of anxiety. All of us are negotiating our earliest experiences of “alarmed aloneness” as we navigate other people and the way we show up with other people.

There is a neuroception of safety and that we matter. It allows us to come out of “alarmed aloneness.”

Remember the song we sang together at the beginning of this homily? “I see myself in joy and love. I know myself, I am enough.” That’s us trying to move into a state of being conducive to learning, to growing, to letting our hippocampus be in the driver seat instead of the amygdala.

Our lack of warmth toward ourselves creates habits of self-sabotage that we do no matter the cost to ourselves. Our nervous system tells us that these self-sabotaging behaviors are protective—because we have not created an inner atmosphere that is conducive to putting these behaviors into perspective—why do we keep doing these things no matter how much they hurt us?

You and I are built for beloved community—not just relationships, not just community, but relationships that nurture and soothe our nervous systems. And it starts with our capacity to warmly welcome ourselves, that inner resonance can free us up to fully show up in community where we matter, where we are met with warm curiosity from others.

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Now, John the Baptist is not often experienced as a source of nurture and encouragement, as a source of warm curiosity and connection.

And he may be one of the most misunderstood figures in scripture—often cast as a hostile misanthrope, or a crazy uncle, or a firebrand who didn't care who he offended. We hear him judging and shaming and calling people out. We picture all this hair and a reclusive cave in the wilderness and him feasting on locusts.

What if we let him be his authentic self and we let ourselves love him there. What if we believe he matters and we meet him with warm curiosity. What if we believe that we matter to him? What if we extend warm welcome to John the Baptist around us, and to the John the Baptist within each of us who really wants and needs for things to change.

What do we see and hear when we stop defending ourselves, when we stop being afraid of this voice crying out in the wilderness for us to believe the Messiah is coming?

“You brood of vipers,” is a tough way to be addressed. These words sound judgmental, hellish, shaming. Put these words in context—let our hippocampus lead the way, not our amygdala. John the Baptist wants us to hear and understand—because our lives depend on it.

Your repentance can't be fake, it can't be feigned. You can't just rush over to him and get baptized like a bunch of snakes slithering away from a fire. We can't jump on Jesus' bandwagon in a trauma reaction, or it won't really take hold in the deepest recesses of who we believe ourselves to be.

Receiving God's good news means our lives change—our lives bear the fruit of true repentance. When we can find the inner warmth to stop hurting ourselves, we can be ready to receive Divine Love in the most radical and world changing way!

John the Baptist is saying, “don't be afraid to be honest with yourself.” Have you embraced God's good news for you with your whole heart? Because if you have, the way you live will show that—you will bear fruit worthy of repentance.

John the Baptist believes in us, in our ability to change, to turn around, and to be transformed. And he loves us enough to tell us the truth. John the Baptist is really talking about neuroplasticity!

The kind of love who is coming, John the Baptist says—is the kind of love who can see right through you—straight to your heart—straight to your “alarmed aloneness.”

This good news is not about hellfire, it is about the freedom for us to be who God made us to be and actually trust each other with that self—to be our true selves and be truly together—the peaceable kingdom in the human realm.

John the Baptist wants us to prepare for the warmth and curiosity towards each of us that Jesus will bring. He is asking us to stop with the self-sabotage. Stop with the “no matter how much it costs me” I will protect myself from... whatever it is that you are protecting yourself from because of the hurt you carry.

John the Baptist says the hurt you are doing to yourself, you are doing to the world. And a healer is coming who is asking us to see ourselves differently—to see who God made us to be. To see ourselves and to see each other as God sees each of us.

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The peaceable kingdom is about radical harmony—a new state of existence that will shift and transform even the biological impulses and survival skills of the world’s most dangerous predators.

The peaceable kingdom is the harmonizing of heaven and earth when we begin to see our self the way that God sees us. It is a vision, a dream of a world deeply resonant with itself.

You matter. You matter in God’s eyes. And you matter here at Grace Covenant. We must practice bathing each other in the beautiful poetry of belonging, in the warm wash of being loved and welcomed home to each other, to ourselves. We are called to not only ready ourselves for the unfolding of God with us, but to begin to be that kind of love to ourselves. That is the resonance of beloved community—a state of being together where pain and peace are in perfect harmony.

Thanks be to God.