*“****The Message of the Messenger****”*

**Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12**

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Of all the millions of *horrifying, heartbreaking* and sometimes *inspiring* images that have emerged from Ukraine since [Russia’s invasion](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/ukraine-russia/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2) nine months ago, one that has stood out … is a photo of *“Wolf\_68”* [graffitied on the wall](https://www.reuters.com/investigates/special-report/ukraine-crisis-bucha-killings-soldiers/) of a home in Bucha, a city where Russian troops carried out a grisly [massacre](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/interactive/2022/bucha-atrocities-civilian-killings/?itid=lk_inline_manual_2) of Ukrainian civilians in March. Reuters reporters quickly determined that *“Wolf\_68”* was the handle, on several social media networks, of a Russian soldier from the northwestern city of Pskov.

*Wolf\_68* stands out not only because it’s unusual for war criminals to sign their work. The moment *also* exemplifies a war shaped by its participants’ use of social media networks — particularly, Twitter, Instagram, and the Russian-developed app Telegram. Media technologies often define wars in popular memory, from Mathew Brady’s photographs of the Civil War to the grainy televised images of Vietnam to the cable coverage of the Persian Gulf War, which seemed so carefully choreographed that it prompted the French philosopher Jean Baudrillard to make the tongue-in-cheek suggestion that *the war hadn’t*[*actually happened*](https://www.amazon.com/Place-Baudrillard-Author-Oct-22-95-Paperback/dp/B007SLKM8Y)*.*

But the imagery streaming from Ukraine functions as a very different tool for its participants. It’s a conflict whose participants themselves are sharing images from the battlefields, in which the easy availability of such imagery has spawned a cottage industry of open-source analysis around the world, and in which it’s no longer surprising to see the president of Ukraine sparring with Elon Musk on Twitter or some of Vladimir Putin’s top political allies criticizing the Russian military’s performance on Telegram.

So, the war in Ukraine may be the first *Twitter war* — and given the state of things at Twitter, perhaps the last one. Though its battlefield performance has been surprisingly effective, Ukraine’s most overwhelming victory has been in the information space, and … this storytelling is an effort by the whole of society. As the blue-and-yellow flags still fluttering from houses throughout the West attest, this is a country that is astonishingly good at telling its story to the world. “As soon as the first enemy tank rolled into view, Ukrainian citizens ‘surreptitiously reached for their phones.’”[[1]](#footnote-1)

I share this with you because *scripture*—in many ways—served as a form of *social media* in the ancient world and our text from Isaiah 11 this morning is a case in point.

You see, when the Babylonians conquered God’s people, they burned their city, killed most of the important people, even lined up all the king’s sons to kill in front of him just before they poked out his eyes. They did it because they wanted God’s people to know that they had no hope*. Their old nation was as dead as an old dead tree stump.* Isaiah agreed that it looked that way at the moment, but he reminded people that some old tree stumps send up fresh shoots that grow into new trees. He insisted that that would happen with God’s people.

In other words, with or without us, God will accomplish a new creation. Having raised up the righteous leader, the Creator will make a new paradise of the earth. Thus enter the animals. *Imagine—*baby goats are best friends with grizzlies; a lamb and a wolf enjoy conversing over a breakfast of clover.

The text, however, has its eye on the deadly aggressions and fears that sicken the world, the ending of which can be envisioned only in a far-future tense. A thoroughly healed creation is imagined, nothing less than Eden remade. And notice that there is not much of a human presence in it—only a few little children are there.

Such visions, of course, are not easy to trust. All around us, fangs are bared. Nations and factions are snapping and snarling. We are at each other’s throats.

Edward Hicks, a nineteenth-century Quaker artist and minister, painted Isaiah’s vision of *“The Peaceable Kingdom”* at least sixty-two times. All the animals are there, and a child among them, and in the background a delegation of Quakers in a peaceful conversation with some Native Americans.

However, over time, the paintings changed. Hicks grew increasingly discouraged by the conflicts of his time, especially within his religious community, and began to make the predators in his paintings more terribly ferocious.[[2]](#footnote-2)

But ask yourself: *What of the “little child” who leads them?* Shall we Christians think of Jesus here?

We should not make this move too quickly. Like the calf, lamb, kid, and ox, *the child stands for the vulnerable,* and is joined by others even younger and more vulnerable, happily playing in a safe world at last. The new creation wants a human presence—new, bright, undefended, and free—to love and care for it all.

This, of course, is the child we seek in Jesus, in whom the lion of Judah and the lamb of God are one. In this child we meet the divine vulnerability and the divine strength. In this Jesus comes a halting of aggression and a banishing of fear—the justice of God, the peace of God, together.

And this is the one that *John the Baptist* spoke of in Matthew 3, as well. You see, sometime in his twenties Jesus left Nazareth and journeyed to a wilderness where a prophet named John the Baptizer was active. Jesus’s decision to do so suggests a deepening religious passion. *Why else would he leave home and family to be with a wilderness prophet?*

John was an important figure in first century Judaism. The gospels all highlight his significance, and the historian Josephus actually gives more space to John than Jesus. His importance did not derive from an institutional role, for he had no official standing. Indeed, he was an anti-establishment figure. According to the gospels, he dressed like Elijah, the great prophet of the Jewish Bible who brought down a kingdom. John also subverted the temple’s role as mediator of access to God by proclaiming a means of forgiveness—repentance and baptism—that bypassed the temple. He publicly criticized his ruler Herod Antipas, and as a result was arrested and executed.

Mark 1:4 provides a very terse description of John’s mission:

*“John the Baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.”*

John’s baptism was *“for the forgiveness of sins.”* As such, it countered the temple’s claim to be the mediator of forgiveness. John was an anti-temple prophet, and Jesus followed him in this.

Moreover, it was a baptism of *repentance,* a word that then meant something quite different from later Christian meanings of being *sorry, remorseful, or penitent* for one’s sins. Repentance, you see, had two related meanings in ancient Judaism. It was associated with return from exile; to repent is to return, to follow *“the way of the Lord”* that leads from exile to the promised land (liberation).The Greek roots of the word suggest an additional meaning: to repent is to *“go beyond the mind that you have”—*to go beyond conventional understandings of what life with God is about.

*This was his main message.*

So, to go to this figure, as Jesus did, was to seek out a movement of *protest* and *renewal.* His time with John was decisive. Our earliest sources begin the story of his adult life with John. We don’t know how long the two were together, but presumably Jesus became a follower of John for a period of time. John was his teacher, his mentor. Clearly Jesus regarded him highly. About him, Jesus later said, *“Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist”* (Matt. 11:11; Luke 7:28). *That* is high praise.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Countless people down through the centuries have been inspired by the prophetic vision of people like Isaiah, John, and Jesus. One of those was *Walter Rauschenbusch,* an American [theologian](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Theologian) and [Baptist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptist) [pastor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pastor) who taught at the [Rochester Theological Seminary](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rochester_Theological_Seminary). Rauschenbusch was a key figure in *the*[*Social Gospel*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Social_Gospel) *movement* that flourished in the United States during the late 19th and early 20th centuries. [He was also the great-grandfather of [*Paul Raushenbush*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Paul_Raushenbush)*,* who is also a Baptist pastor and currently serves as the Executive Director of the *Interfaith Alliance*. And Paul is scheduled to be our *Didier Seminar* speaker next April.

In [1886](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/1886), (Walter) Rauschenbusch began his pastorate in the Second German Baptist Church in *"*[*Hell's Kitchen*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hell%27s_Kitchen)*",* [New York](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_York_City). Urban poverty and funerals for children led him to social activism. For him, the Church had an essential role in the fight against systemic injustices among all groups and for each person.

In Rauschenbusch's early adulthood, mainline Protestant churches were largely allied with the social and political establishment, in effect supporting such practices as the use of [child labor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Child_labor) and the domination of [robber barons](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Robber_baron_(industrialist)). Many church leaders did not see a connection between these issues and their own congregations, so did nothing to address the suffering. But Rauschenbusch saw it as his duty as a minister and student of Christ to act with love by trying to improve social conditions.

Rauschenbusch's view of Christianity was that its purpose was to spread the Kingdom of God, not through a *"*[*fire and brimstone*](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fire_and_brimstone)*"* style of preaching, but by the Christlike lives led by its members. He did not understand Jesus' death as an act of substitutionary atonement; rather, he came to believe that Jesus died *"to substitute love for selfishness as the basis of human society."* Rauschenbusch wrote that *"Christianity is in its nature revolutionary*" and tried to remind society of that. He taught that the Kingdom of God *"is not (only) a matter of getting individuals to heaven, but of transforming the life on earth into the harmony of heaven."*

In *Christianity and the Social Crisis* (1907), Rauschenbusch wrote, *"Whoever uncouples the religious and the social life has not understood Jesus. Whoever sets any bounds for the reconstructive power of the religious life over the social relations and institutions of men, to that extent denies the faith of the Master."* The significance of this work is that it spoke of the individual's responsibility toward society.

In his *Theology for the Social Gospel* (1917), he wrote that for [John the Baptist](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_the_Baptist), [baptism](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Baptism) was *"not a ritual act of individual salvation but an act of dedication to a religious and social movement."*

Concerning the social depth and breadth of Christ's atoning work, Rauschenbusch wrote: *"Jesus … did in a very real sense bear the weight of the public sins of organized society, and they in turn are causally connected with all private sins."*

Rauschenbusch's work influenced, among others, [Martin Luther King Jr.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Martin_Luther_King_Jr.), [Desmond Tutu](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Desmond_Tutu), labor activist and suffragist [Lucy Randolph Mason](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lucy_Randolph_Mason), [Reinhold Niebuhr](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Reinhold_Niebuhr), Presbyterian minister and pacifist [Norman Thomas](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Norman_Thomas), [George McGovern](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/George_McGovern), theologian [James McClendon](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_McClendon) and his grandson, the philosopher, [Richard Rorty](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Richard_Rorty). Even in the 21st century Rauschenbusch's name is used by certain social-justice ministries in tribute to his life and work.

The idea of the *Kingdom of God* is crucial to Rauschenbusch's theology of the social gospel. He stated that the ideology and *"doctrine of the Kingdom of God"* of which Jesus Christ *"always spoke"* had been gradually replaced by that of the church. This was done at first by the early church out of what appeared to be necessity, but Rauschenbusch called Christians to return to the doctrine of the Kingdom of God … and he saw four practical advantages in emphasizing the Kingdom of God rather than the Church: 1). The Kingdom of God is not subject to the pitfalls of the Church; 2). it can test and correct the Church; 3). it is a prophetic, future-focused ideology and a revolutionary, social, and political force that understands all creation to be sacred; and 4). it can help save the problematic, sinful social order.[[4]](#footnote-4)

John Buchanan, the former Senior Pastor of Fourth Presbyterian Church in Chicago, reflecting on the Kingdom of God [and specifically on Edward Hick’s *Peaceable Kingdom],* said: *“The painting pricks my conscience every time I see it because of the enormous gap between its lovely vision of a peaceable kingdom and the reality of our world.”*

In a similar way, the season Advent serves to *“prick our consciences”* [to spur us to strive to *narrow the gap* between what *is* and what *could be*] as it unfolds like an Advent calendar of images—the seas roiling, the moon and stars falling, the Son of Man coming in clouds to judge and, as always, those Isaiah dreams of peace, justice, hope, and reconciliation in those ancient familiar phrases. The soul falls onto an empty plane—a new dimension of time. We find ourselves in the wilderness. John the Baptist appears and calls us to repent, to turn around, return from exile, inviting us deeper into the unfolding story—expanding our understanding of God. Come to the river, wash away our [and societies] sins, start a new life. Now. Because something is coming!

1. Joshua Keating, *A New Book on the War in Ukraine Tries to Tell a Story of Progress,* The Washington Post, December 1, 2022 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. John Dillenberger, *The Visual Arts in America* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1984, pp. 130-132. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Marcus J. Borg, *Jesus: Uncovering the Life, Teachings, and Relevance of a Religious Revolutionary,* Harper San Francisco, pp. 117-120. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Walter Rauschenbusch, *Wikipedia* [↑](#footnote-ref-4)