

Advent 2 ~ DECEMBER 9, 2007 ~ **Isaiah 11: 1-10**; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15: 4-13; Matthew 3: 1-12

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his 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; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 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.*

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## **Imagine that...**

Imagine a wolf and a lamb setting up house together... imagine a leopard sharing a bed with a kid... imagine a calf and a lion having dinner together. Try to picture a cow grazing next to a bear and their young cavorting together... picture lions eating grain... picture babies and toddlers playing without fear in a pit of snakes... picture it.... These obvious mismatches are meant to catch our attention and tune us in to the fact that something different and unique is going on in this vision of Isaiah's.

See in your mind and your heart Isaiah's image of peaceful cohabitation, a vision of reconciliation between life and death – a vision of what God promises. Isaiah offers a picture of hope in a time of uncertainty. He invites us to dream God's own dream for the world – a dream in which our own longings for justice, equity, righteousness, and harmony are articulated – a dream that defeats hopelessness and empowers determination.

The passage from Isaiah shows a world where things that usually cause fear in people are changed into things that we no longer need to dread. Everything is turned around, and no one need fear for their safety – they are protected by God. This is how it will be in the *peaceable kingdom*.

In ancient Israel, the king was anointed as the representative of God – regarded as a sacred person. Most ancient Near Eastern cultures shared a similar concept of monarchy as divinely appointed. The king upheld the social order. The care of the poor and weak and the building of temples served to prove their divine appointment. As God's anointed,

Israel's kings enjoyed a unique intimacy with God – embodying the Lord's blessing and inheritance.

When Zedekiah, the last king of Judah, was led into exile and died in Babylon, the national disaster long anticipated by prophets like Isaiah and Jeremiah became a reality. But the concept of a divinely appointed king did not die. A vision of an ideal king descended from David soon developed into the hope for a future Messiah – an anointed one whom we will come to call "the Christ".

The very first verse of this passage from Isaiah envisions a king of David's line since Jesse was David's father. One who, with wisdom and justice, would restore God's harmonious creation. At a time of disillusionment and despair Isaiah opens a window onto the future of Israel that reaches into our world today and invites us again to imagine a world at peace, a world of safety, a world of hope.

Isaiah invites us into God's dream – a dream that is more than a figment of imagination. It is a promise, a divine dream that requires commitment as well as trust. Dreaming God's dream empowers us to work now and here for what God wants for creation and will accomplish fully in the future. Isaiah's hopeful vision is echoed in Paul's letter to the Romans as he points out various scriptures written to give us hope. The vision of hope reverberates again in the proclamation of John who cries from the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord – turn around! God is coming!

Isaiah's promise is of Israel's restoration, "*A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a twig shall sprout from his stock.*" For Jews the prophet's words speak not only of the advent of a messiah at the end of time but also of our recurring experience of redemption throughout time. Isaiah's promise has already been fulfilled time and again whenever God's people have been felled and new shoots have miraculously appeared. Soon after his resurrection, the early church applied Isaiah's prophecy to Jesus. The emphasis of the passage, however, is on the peace and justice of the king's reign.

*A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse; a twig shall sprout from his stock.* This rebirth is a testimony to God's desire – God's longing for all people. For the wolf does not yet lie down with the lamb nor is it yet safe for a baby to play over a viper's hole or even in a city park. People still die of poverty and plague and the earth is filled with violence as water covers the sea.

So we are all waiting and working for the advent of justice and peace. We try to heal the sick and free the captive. But when we fail – when, because of our hard hearts or despite our best efforts, lofty old trees and promising young ones are ruthlessly hacked away – then God does not give death the last word. God does not want despair to overwhelm us.

And so God shows us that from the stumps of many a fallen tree, tiny green shoots sprout with new life.

Our readings this morning remind us that the future holds great hope both for our personal lives and for the world – hope that we live into as we offer ourselves to the Lord of the future – and we offer ourselves because we have received. We may live in wilderness times – like Isaiah, like Paul, like John – we may see the desolation that results from human activity in the world – we may acknowledge the harsh realities around us.

However, like John we need to see our time of wilderness as the source and time of new possibilities – like John we must see it as the context not for despair but for hope.

In the wilderness John calls for repentance because of the promise God brings. He calls for repentance because of what has already been given – turning to God is possible because God is turning to us. This is what we affirm in our communion liturgy when we say that through the sacrament God comes to us so that we may come to God. This is how we live. The gift of God's presence and rule – this divine generosity – turns our lives upside down. That is what John is getting at in his harsh words: *Don't appeal to your ancestors! God is able to make children of Abraham from a pile of rocks!* The words shake the very identity of the people. There is only one response to the coming of God: repentance. This is not a gift you can pay back, not a gift you can earn, it is a gift that turns you around – turns you to face God, who in Christ turns to come among us.

We are not helpless spectators to God's activity. We are stewards and instruments, servants and reconcilers. We have a role to play in God's dream – in Isaiah's vision – in John's call. While there is much to lament in the wilderness we are still a people of hope and we need to share with others the hope we have received. God is faithful even when we aren't.

Today, our Advent candle symbolizes peace. Peace is a word that we hear a lot during the holiday season, especially in the church. We are anticipating the birth of the one called *the Prince of Peace*. When the angels herald Christ's birth, they sing of peace for the entire world. Our Christmas cards contain messages of peace. Our carols talk about bringing peace on earth. But sometimes it seems these dreams of peace are just that: dreams – imaginings that are too idealistic, too unrealistic to be worthy our serious consideration. It's hard, today, to believe that peace will come to our earth. Peace – is it possible?

Close your eyes, open your heart – imagine...

We want peace – we need peace, within us, at home, in our community, in our world. But how – how can peace come? Isaiah had a vision of this leader that would be filled with God's spirit. We read this as a prophecy of the Christ.

Today, we light a candle for peace. The root of Jesse, the one we know as Jesus, is standing as a signal to the peoples. Will we listen? Will we learn? What are we willing to imagine?

God in Christ is with us as we grope fearfully in the wilderness, as we fumble for a future that seems far off. God is about to come to rescue humanity from its exile. Turning to God is possible, because in Jesus Christ, God is turning to us. O Prince of Peace, we pray that you will come quickly and dwell in our hearts. *Prepare the way of the Lord!* **Amen.**