

Year A: Advent 2b Is 11:1-10; Ps 72:1-7, 18-19; Rom 15:4-13; Mt 3:1-12
 St. Barnabas, Florissant – December 08, 2019

Focus Sentence: Advent is a time for HOPE, because of our repentance.

I offer these thoughts in the name of God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Advent is that strange time which will arrive, that time *to come*. Were in a place and time of waiting, watching, looking forward to the coming of Jesus, both in Bethlehem, and at the end of time as we know it. Yes, and above all, Advent is a time of hope.

PAUSE

In this morning's lesson from the Hebrew Scriptures, we hear the prophet Isaiah, some 700 years before the time of Jesus, speaking many of those remarkable words of comfort and, yes, hope, which we've become familiar with hearing this time of year. "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." And a bit further on, Isaiah says, "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." And what's the reason for this hopefulness, what's the REASON for the SEASON, what's the cause for our hope? Well, it's foretold (we Christians think, anyway) by Isaiah as he writes in the beginning of this morning's passage: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," Jesus, of course, descended from Jesse, the father of David, Jesus' royal ancestor. Though the flourishing Jewish people, the fulsome tree of Jesse's son, David, may have been reduced to a mere stump in Isaiah's time, there is great hope for the prophet that a new shoot shall come forth from that stump. The Spirit of the Lord, the breath, the great wind of God, blows over the seemingly dead stump and creates new and wonderful possibilities.

PAUSE

That message of Advent hope is continued in Psalm 72, where we hear, "He shall defend the needy among the people; he shall rescue the poor and crush the

oppressor. ... In his time shall the righteous flourish; there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more."

And, then, Paul, writing to his Roman converts on the other side of Jesus' Resurrection, tells them, "For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope."

So, my sisters and brothers, this morning, we have a wonderful message of Advent hope. It really feels nice to hear that message during these gloomy, dark winter days leading up to Christmas, doesn't it?

PAUSE

But wait, hold on just a minute! Our comfortable, warm and fuzzy Advent feelings of hope are suddenly shattered by some crazy mental case, some wild street person, some sunburned desert rat, with long tangled hair and dirty beard. "You brood of vipers!" he shouts. "Who warned you to flee from ... wrath?" And don't think, for even a minute, that, just because you might have Abraham as your ancestor, you've somehow got it made! Really, God could raise up children of Abraham from these dry rocks! And not only that, someone much more powerful than I am is coming; and he's going to baptize you with FIRE! He's going to separate the good people, the wheat, from the worthless chaff, and that chaff is heading right for the UNQUENCHABLE fire!

PAUSE

WHOA!! Not much comfort or Advent hope in that message, do you think?

Well, just possibly, John the Baptizer sounds a counterpoint to our comforting words of Advent hope that we really need to hear, that we should really listen to, because they shake us out of our complacency.

Speaking personally, I know that those comforting words of hope, those dreamy passages from Isaiah and from the Psalms, have been showing up on Christmas cards,

and on billboards, and in Christmas plays at least since the 1950's, when one of my Advent jobs was to help my mother work on her yearly Christmas card mailing.

But you know, I'm getting pretty old now, and those words of hope are still around, still gracing our Christmas cards and plays and such. But have they been at all realized? Apparently, SOMEDAY the whole earth is supposed to be filled with the knowledge of the Lord, as Isaiah puts it. But it sure seems like we just keep waiting for this promise to be fulfilled.

In anticipation of the coming final revelation through God's Messiah (arising from that stump of Jesse), John the Baptist was sent to prepare the way, to smooth out the rdugh ways for the Messiah. A promise of hope that is for all the peoples (and not just for those children of Abraham) must also be a promise of peace, John says. But not even John could speak of that peace as already a presently attained reality. For John, as for Isaiah those many years before, it remained an IDEAL to be realized when God would uniquely bring about the redemption of a fallen creation. And today, even after Jesus' coming to earth, that promise still remains a distant **future** hope for us.

PAUSE

So then, is there really no hope at all? Is Advent simply an empty ritual we go through every year just because we've always done it?

Well, sisters and brothers, I believe here is where we've got to listen to the OTHER part of crazy John's message. And that message is simply to REPENT. And what, we might ask, is repentance? To repent is not what a lot of people think. It doesn't just mean "to be sorry." That's NOT what real repentance is. Someone once said that repentance "means being sorry enough to quit." That comes a little bit closer to the truth, but it's still not quite right. The Greek word for repentance (*metanoia*) means "to change one's mind." Repentance is really a change of attitude; it's not an emotional feeling, but rather a "moral purpose." It's a determined decision that we're done with sin.

PAUSE

Given the world we live in today (or, for that matter, any of the world conditions under which the Scripture writers lived back then), the realization of God's promise of future peace is not an automatic development for which you and I can just sit back and wait. It won't come as a result of wishful thinking or of humans wanting it to be so. Isaiah looked for God to raise up a future Agent who would bring God's purpose into being. Crazy John declared that God's Agent had actually arrived, and predicted that His arrival would mean judgment. Paul felt able to declare, after the fact, what God's Messiah had actually done.

PAUSE

And this is where John's message of repentance is important. Advent tells us to wake up, to listen, to be ready, for the Kingdom of God is NEAR. People might see the world as a dead stump. God sees the potential for shoots and branches; much unfinished work remains to be done. As John announces, "the Kingdom of heaven has come near" --- near, not here. The Kingdom won't just happen by itself; not at all, but if each one of us, one by one, can really repent, can really change our attitudes, can say NO to any and every privilege which (like the Pharisees and Sadducees of John's day) can suppress others, if finally we can show that we understand that God's promise is for everyone, then the Kingdom really is nearer, and there really is hope and comfort during this Advent season.

And EXPECT the fulfillment of the promise. Usher in the presence of the Redeemer. Take that next step toward the encounter that awaits each and every one of us.

And finally, as Paul puts it so beautifully: "May the God of HOPE fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."

AMEN.