

The Second Sunday of Advent 4 December 2022
Saint Aidan's Episcopal Church, Portland OR
The Rev'd Canon Raggs Ragan, Interim Rector.

In the Name of God who comes to us with hope and healing. Amen.

Advent is a beautiful time, a time of hope and promise, of longing and waiting. It is not passive; there is work to do. But it is not frantic (like the commercial 'Christmas season').

Today we have an interesting contrast between two prophets. From Isaiah we hear about the root of Jesse and the peaceable kingdom, a collection of images of all creation blessed and thriving together, a series of beautiful images of peace and healing – the prophet as comforter. Then we have John the Baptist, wild and crazy, a man who has gone into the desert to hear God and come out to share what he has learned with his people – the prophet as accuser. Most of us find people like John the Baptist frightening and off putting, but perhaps envy their certainty. Like Isaiah, John knows God and knows that God is active in the world for our good. But he is very irritated with people who trust to their own power to control their world with arrogance and disregard for the love which is the essence of God. When we just hear the Baptist shouting, we can miss his rooting in the prophetic tradition that knows the loving heart of God, that is steeped in the beautiful images of Isaiah. John is frustrated because the people who should be living by those images are instead seeking their own power at the expense of everyone else. They are blind to the interconnections and the promise of peace.

Like John, Paul was deeply rooted in the Hebrew tradition and understood scripture to be the fruit of encounters with God preserved for the benefit of every generation. The Isaiah prophecies were addressed to a particular time and circumstance, as were John's words, but they are recorded and shared through succeeding generations as a mechanism for God's Spirit to continue to speak to all who are willing to listen, in every time and place. What exactly the Word is saying, what comfort or challenge is given, varies from person to person, place to place, time to time – but the Word is always there for us.

What tends to stick most in our hearts and minds and to form who we are and how we act is stories and images. Today's passage from Isaiah gives us two extremely evocative and powerful images: the Tree of Jesse and the Peaceable Kingdom. Both of these have generated countless paintings, drawings, stained glass windows, and more. What they share is a sense of interconnectedness, of mutual support and dependence.

You may have family or church traditions of creating Jesse trees in Advent, trees with branches revealing Jesus' royal lineage going back to King David and his father Jesse, or sometimes revealing the various prophets who led up to Jesus and John, or sometimes going all the way from the first humans to Jesus. When stained glass was developed to the point that complex pictures could be created, one of the most common subjects was the Jesse Tree, reminding people of the connected history of the human family and God's ongoing relationship to it, all culminating in Christ.

Another way to make the Jesse Tree more personal is to create a tree of your own spiritual life: who first brought you to church or taught you to pray? Who challenged your faith and helped you grow? What authors or artists have helped you understand God and the life of faith? Who welcomed you into the family of Christ? Into Saint Aidan's? This can be in the form of a tree or an outline or a narrative, whatever you like – it can be an advent discipline of memory and gratitude for all of the connections that have grafted you into God's family tree, the tree of faith and community.

The Jesse Tree is an image reminding us of our interconnectedness, but the Peaceable Kingdom does this even more vividly. Whenever I hear Isaiah's evocative description of the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the lion and the fatling, the cow and the bear, the baby in the adder's den, I call to mind the paintings of the 19th century American painter Edward Hicks. I know you have all seen them. For Hicks this was what God's Reign was all about, mutual cooperation and blessing, the interconnectedness of all creation. Sometimes he included in the background groups of European settlers and native tribe members in peaceful conversation. Hicks shared Isaiah's understanding of God's dream for creation: mutual cooperation and blessing for every being.

This particular image is the one that has held the strongest place in my heart all my life, and it affects all of my choices and decisions. It is a wonderful image for Advent, our time of longing and hope, of anxious waiting, anxious because we are so aware of how far short of God's call our world is.

When I envision John the Baptist off in the desert communing with God, and with scorpions and locusts and lions and leopards, I imagine his anger at the leaders of Israel, those most thoroughly steeped in the holy tradition, who were supposed to be guiding and caring for the people, his frustration with their failure to remember God's dream, to see that living in mutual connection and support is the only way to live in God's kingdom. I understand why he is so angry and frustrated – but I choose to focus on the hope, and the promise, not on the ways we all fall short.

Isaiah also gives us a vivid picture of how God in Christ will come among us. This is the ultimate destination for all God's creatures. It is therefore the image we are meant to hold in our hearts to tell us how to live, what to strive for, how to prepare. The Chosen One of God will be characterized by 'wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.' In this kingdom, judgement will not be based on hearsay or mere appearance or power and influence, but on righteousness and equity. The poor and the meek will not be trampled under foot, but treated with care and justice. Wickedness and oppression will pass away out of our experience, faithfulness and fairness will be the air we breathe. All creation will be part of this 'new world order', in which there will be no hurt or destruction.

This is the Peaceable Kingdom in which all the predators who have inspired such fear in the past no longer prey on the other creatures – no fear, no hunting, no mutual eating, no destruction, no need for fierce and violent leaders, as 'a little child shall lead them.' '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.' This is the image we have to look forward to, to live by. What makes this world of Shalom possible is the gracious and powerful Coming of the Lord.

So if this is the coming we are preparing for, how are we to prepare? First of all, not with frenzy or fear, but with joy and hope. We are not preparing for loss or destruction, but for a great reordering which will ease all of the pain and loss which are so much the reality of our lives. We are preparing for the Advent of One who loves us more truly than any love we have ever yet known and who will nourish not just us but all creatures.

As part of our preparation, we too, are invited to help justice come to the poor and the oppressed and the victims of violence, to be spreading the domain of justice and peace, of life for the planet and all its creatures.

Isaiah tells us that there will be no hurt or destruction in the Kingdom of God, because the world will be utterly filled with the knowledge of the Lord. Instead of fighting our way through the crowds at the mall or spending hours ordering online bargains, we are invited to devote ourselves to developing our relationship with God, in the sure and certain hope of his coming to us in peace and love, bringing harmony and justice to our lives and to the world as a whole.

We need hope in these difficult times. We need hope to be the Body of Christ and to do Christ's work of reconciliation in the world. We need hope to prepare with gladness for the coming of the Lord. We need hope to rejoice in what is and has been and will be for us in God's kingdom. We need hope to throw wide the portals of our hearts that the King of Glory might come in and make a home there. That is why throughout Advent we keep calling Emmanuel, God with us, to come, come into every aspect of our lives and the life of the world.

In the words of Paul:

May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.