

Gracious God, open our ears that we may hear your truth, open our eyes that we may see your kingdom, and open our hearts and minds that we might know the cries of our brothers and sisters who are hungry, and hurting, and sometimes even dying without the knowledge of your love for them. May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts together be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

Happy Advent... you brood of vipers!

The approach to Christmas is all about anticipation. But here we are in this second Sunday of Advent, this second Sunday of our journey in this sermon series that asks the question, "Are we there yet?", and we find ourselves faced with John the Baptist. He may be paving the way for the coming of the Lord, but let's face it, the man would depress a hyena. It's probably a safe bet to say that we'll never see John the Baptist on a Christmas card.

He reminds me of the Peanuts cartoon where Snoopy is sitting on top of his doghouse with his typewriter as he begins a story, "It was a dark and stormy night..." Lucy comes along, asks what he's doing and he shows her the introduction to the story. Lucy, being Lucy rants and raves about how depressing his story would have to be match the introduction and she tells Snoopy, all good stories begin with "once upon a time." Snoopy looks thoughtful, Lucy goes away, and Snoopy begins to revise his story. He types, "Once upon a time, it was a dark and stormy night."

John the Baptist has indeed come to pave the way for the coming of the Lord. He didn't know until later that this would be his cousin, Jesus. But he DID know that the coming of the Lord meant that some big changes were coming and that the people needed to be prepared. He called them to repentance. He called for them to change their life direction and prepare themselves for the reestablishment of a relationship, a favored relationship, with God.

John calls us to turn around, repent, think again. John's call is to think differently about ourselves and our place in the world, about the one that we will

follow, and about how we are following. He tells the Pharisees to rely not on their pedigree. He asks them what they have done lately. He asks them how they have lived lately.

And that is what this season is all about. Anticipation of a restored relationship with God. But the secular forces in our lives, the forces that want us to restore our relationships by buying stuff that we can't afford so that we can give it to people who have more stuff than they will ever need are the ones with the loudest voices at this time of year. And these influences have been hard at work since early summer... starting with the Christmas in July sales and then morphing into the sight of Christmas decorations going on sale in September with the Christmas giving hype ramping up in October before reaching the fever pitch in the weeks prior to Thanksgiving. In the midst of all of these influences, it is no wonder that we are already exhausted and wondering when we will finally get to the moment. "Are we there yet?" Is an apt question... and the answer is no.

I think that it is easy for us to lose sight of the fact that the only reason why we do any of this is due to the fact that God has come to us in the first place as a babe born into the most humble of circumstances. The incarnation of Christ, the coming of Emmanuel, God with us in the flesh, the **bonding** of the God of all creation with the essence of that creation is the miracle. It is the essence of God as "the Word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighborhood", as Eugene Peterson phrases it in his rendering of John 1:14. But this time of Advent is not about preparing us for the coming of a baby born in a stable. It is about preparing us for the promises of the coming kin-dom of God... a kin-dom that is both here and yet to come.

Last week, the prophet Isaiah offered up the promise of a wholly different future for those who identify themselves as belonging to "the house of Jacob." Instead of being overrun and outdone by conquering armies, Zion will become a magnet for those who seek the world's true magnate and "go up to the mountain of the Lord." Against the gravitational pull of this world's powers and

principalities, these nations “stream up” to this mountaintop to reach new levels of relationship with God. Instead of seeking to destroy Jerusalem, to exterminate Zion, peoples from all over the world will come so that God may “teach us his ways” and so that they may “walk in his paths.”

This week, the prophet tells us what this peaceable kin-dom will look like. It seems that no one can articulate the vision of the coming kingdom better than Isaiah. It is why we keep coming back to these prophecies year after year - to hear the voice of the master storyteller tell us that this “dog eat dog” world isn’t all that there is. We need to hear about lambs and wolves, of leopards and kids, we need to hear of the calf and the lion and the fatling parading along after that little child like Simba and Timon and Pumba singing “Hakuna Matata” through the jungle.

The prophecy that Isaiah describes this morning assures us that this journey is not only possible, but that it will be a certainty. This wild and crazy promise, this vision of a world at peace, this living out of the implications of justice and mercy - all of this IS possible... and it gives us hope.

Isaiah visualises a world of possibility... a world of “shall”.

A shoot shall come out... a branch shall grow... the Spirit shall rest on this coming Messiah... this coming king.

He shall judge the poor with righteousness. Note that the word judge has the same root as *mishap*, that marvelous Hebrew word meaning not that the good are rewarded and the bad are punished, but justice as in the society where the neediest and the most marginalized are cared for. That’s what God’s king, the ideal king, labors for in the age to come.

In this peaceable kingdom, the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf, and the lion together and a little child shall lead them. This isn’t a “maybe”; this isn’t a “what if”; this is a “shall.” It is possible because it is a promise... a promise of the Living God of creation.

This coming of the reign of God is a promise. It generates hope. When we claim the hope of this promise it is expressed in the way that we live our lives on a daily basis. It means that we long for and work for that day when grace and peace and faith and joy abound. Because we have hope, we can share that hope with everyone that we meet because we know that God keeps God's promises.

And that hope changes us. And as that hope changes us, we become the sign of God's presence in the world. We become the evidence that all of this IS possible. We who gather together in worship to find hope for living become hope for those who still travel in the desert of this life... we become the hope that we seek.

Hope in the desert. Hope in Emmanuel. God. Is. With. Us.

Thanks be to God. In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.