

#2 16-17

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Isaiah 11:1-10

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Expecting Love

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

The lectionary scriptures for this second Advent in this cycle, according to Rev. Dr. Joanne Carlson Brown, are:

Prophecy, promises, and preparation – all ... part of the Advent tradition. They serve as reminders in this hectic season that there is more to prophecy than guessing what is in this package; more to promises than what Santa Claus will bring; more to preparation than cleaning house and putting on a spread for a holiday party. On this second Sunday of Advent, we are called back to the longing, not for a certain present, but for a messiah who brings about a beloved community of harmony and peace – but not without opposition. These passages speak of wishes, desires, and the hint of fulfillment that is Christmas. We need to hear, believe, and get ready.

Prophecy, promises, and preparation . . . longing for the beloved community ~ such is Advent. So many times our memories around Christmas are a longing for the mystery that we associate with these days. As though the Gifts and the decorations are only an outpouring of the wishes for cozy, loving, joyous moments. For many, the holidays bring forth the aching of the loss of loved ones, or the pain of feeling less than . . . the blatant consumerism of this season can make so many feel like they are not enough, not worthy of love and comfort, there is a longing for the true meaning of Christmas.

How many humans resounded at Charlie Brown's Christmas when he confesses in his frustration and agony, "I guess I really don't know what Christmas is all about. Isn't there anyone who knows what Christmas is all about?" Because we all know that feeling of being lost in the whirl of commercial and emotional expectation. The stress seems to overwhelm.

So the expectation of Love during this season can be so easily lost. It can be ignored and denied as though getting and giving the perfect gift is the greatest things one can do this season of cold and dark days. Buying and playing and baking things to get us through until the days get longer.

John the Baptist is calling us, as the voice of God, seemingly an strange outcast, in the desert of all places- the place where the Israelites were freed, and where they struggled to be faithful. From the

place of thirst and yearning, this voice speaks for our souls when he tells us to prepare our hearts. Because it is only from looking within that we can discover our wilderness and find what we long for.

Repentance is to turn around, to turn from looking only for what we want and desire and feel - and turn to seek God. And John warns us that just doing the right things in the past will not get us this straight path to God. He warned the followers that just because they are children of Abraham does not mean they automatically are going to get their deepest desire of divinity. We need to humbly strive to wait and want God's truth and God's justice and God's love so much that we are willing to sacrifice our own egos that our souls may contribute to the desire for love that this world has.

And this world desires so much love. This world is so filled with fear and anger and a sense of life not being fair. It is hard to expect love, when you can't even expect fairness. This is why the concept of a just peace / in contrast to the idea of a just war has been the focal point of so many theologians. Without Justice, there can be no peace, and without justice war is a futile and horrible waste of lives and resources. Justice is the foundation of a sense of future, and the future is what Advent prepares us for.

Advent, a time of focusing on what we expect. How many of us know the feeling of thinking we are just stupid for expecting something that is absolutely honorable, and Godly? And the sadness, the disappointment in giving up our greatest dreams. John is telling us to repent from hopelessness, to turn around and continue to expect the Godly. And seek those places within us that are not Godly, and replace them with the hope that we have through Christ. Replace those apathetic moments and sadness, and seek - expect - the love of God. For nothing can separate us from that. John 15:9: As the Father has loved me, so I have loved you; abide in my love.

So we are being asked to look ahead, how can we make Christ's teachings our focus for our lives and this church for the coming year? How can we make the expectation of giving and receiving love the focus of our Advent and Christmas meditations? How can we speak of justice and peace and truth and comfort and take on the power of the living Christ in our hopes and expectations? This is the meaning of repentance. Looking ahead to what can be done, not resting on our present and past and

We are constantly in a state of repentance - looking forward and growing, if we are doing our faith right. But not in a way that fills us with shame - but fills us with desire for more - more truth - more God - more kindness, love, justice. It is selfish to think only of what we cannot do, but repent, and believe and trust that God is good and powerful, and be prepared to change our patterns - make the way straight - so that not our will - but God's will may be seen and planned for and done!

Prophecy, promises, and preparation . . . longing for the beloved community . . . today we hear again the well known words of John the Baptist to "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." And 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' We may even be able to sing the Godspell version of this! But today we are being asked to take these words as though we are hearing them for the very first time and put them in the context of Advent, and for our church. Prepare this church, prepare our lives, O Lord, for your coming! May we be willing to repent and to live for the coming Kingdom. Turn our fears around and expect hope and love for this church, for now and forever more!
AMEN