

# ADVENT PROMISES: FINDERS KEEPERS

Commentary for Advent II - 2007

## Texts:

### First Lesson:

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. Isaiah 11:1-10

### Second Lesson:

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. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." 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. Romans 15:4-13

### The Gospel:

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." Matthew 3:1-12

"Advent, our season of expectation, makes no sense unless there are promises spoken by God which impinge upon our life. For Advent, therefore, we may set ourselves two agendas: to clarify the promises of God that have been spoken over us, and to decide if we dare to look at those promises seriously. If we cannot locate the promises, or if we do not trust the promises, then Advent is an empty, silly gesture."

Walter Brueggemann

**My** own reflections this last week started with another one of Isaiah's ancient visions. This time it was the wolf and lamb dwelling side by side, the leopard with the young goat, the lion, calf and fatling together; and babies playing harmlessly with lead-contaminated toys ('er, rather poisonous vipers, in this case). And a little child leads the whole thing. What a vision.

As I recall, for me it was a well-known, prophetic, contemporary preacher, George Regas – who was at the time a grad school classmate of mine at Claremont – who first told this old gag:

An animal trainer had managed to create a zoo exhibit featuring a ferocious, mighty lion in the same enclosure with a little lamb. Imagine, a lion and lamb dwelling side by side. People came from all over to see such a sight.

Finally, someone asked the obvious, "How'd he do it?" The trainer replied, "Oh it's not that hard – quite simple really. Every so often you just have to put in a fresh lamb."

So much for Isaiah's ancient vision about a time yet to come; and meanwhile – even in what becomes our Christian faith – we all know what happens to the sacrificial lamb. Advent, in some ways, is all about that mean-time, that in-between time; about what we see, what we do, how we hope, and the un-met promises we see and even challenge God to yet fulfill.

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So I reflect further on the passages we read this evening, to find what's alive in what we want to believe is living Word.

In Isaiah's passage we have the future predicated on own emergence from the "stump of Jesse." Jesse, you recall, was the father of King David. And God had *made a promise to David that his kingdom would last forever*; that through his descendants, his reign would never end, God would save God's people and bless the world. But things didn't work out. So 200 years after the great King David, Isaiah picks up a fresh hope of the ancient promise and prophesizes: "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit."

Centuries later, when Paul wrote his letter to the early Christian Church in Rome (the 2nd reading), he refers to what was written in former days for the sake of our "instruction," for "steadfast and encouragement" we might have "hope." Paul wants to look back along the branches and down the trunk to the root of the tradition from whence came his new message we call the Christian gospel.

Not too many years after than, when the gospel of Matthew emerges in another early Christian community, the passage we read this evening links John the Baptist to Isaiah's ancient prophecy about the Jesse thing. Not only is this gospel story about a link (Matthew's very big on "proof texting" – showing how ancient Jewish scriptures get fulfilled in his gospel story), but – according to John -- the fulfillment of that ancient hope and promise. It comes in the form of one crying out of the wilderness. It is the prelude to the main act.

Matthew, however, also expands the earlier gospel of Mark's similar story about John. Matthew includes the additional scene about John the Baptist dissenting not only the authority – but even pedigree – of the ecclesiastical authorities (the Pharisees and Sadducees). And, in so doing, he essentially *severs that future hope and promise of Isaiah's ancient visions left unfulfilled from the kind of comfortable concessions to the way things are.*

The old stump of Jesse does indeed yet hold promise. In fact, Matthew will go through genealogical contortions to attempt to trace Jesus' ancestry back to Jesse. But everything in its path – every tree that can't produce good fruit, John the Baptist says -- should be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"Even now," he says, "the ax is lying at the root of the trees ..."

John was one of any number of self-appointed prophets and preachers who felt inspired to make sense out of the seeming senselessness of an unfulfilled promise; the tattered remnants of which had left God's chosen people left in shambles. The only superpower in the known world had imposed its will, by means of its military might and domination, in order to presumably offer them the great benefits in being a flattering reflection of Rome; when, in fact, what was once King David's great kingdom that was supposed to last forever was now just a backwater province of the Empire.

By the time John the Baptist emerges out of the wilderness, the Pharisees and Sadducees had been unable, or unwilling, to conceive of any kind of divine reign on earth, other than a physical, tangible, literal one they could sink their teeth into; which, of course, they eventually did – serving up the Baptist's head on a platter before moving on to his cousin, the troublemaker from Galilee.

And all this, despite such time-honored, ancient writings available to them, such as Isaiah's passage; this passage which speaks of wisdom, understanding, counsel and might described as being executed by one who wears "righteousness" like a belt 'round his waist, and "faithfulness" 'round his loins. What kind of an outfit is that, they must have asked themselves?

They're much more comfortable with what is seen, not unseen. They're used to seeing the likes of John the Baptist, dressed in a hairsuit and leather belt 'round his waist. For in the ensuing centuries of Jewish tradition, since the days of the ancient prophets like Is, the temple leaders and scholars -- who by that time had literally inherited their positions based on succession -- had pretty much settled for the way things were.

But those shrill words from Baptist's lips, "Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees ..." must have had an un-nerving, chilling effect, about a different kind of judgment, about a different kind of unsettling of this world as it now is; enough, at least, to draw the "brood of vipers" out of their comfortable places, to meet the one coming in from the wilderness at the riverbank.

At the Jordan, John would employ the Jewish practice of baptism: a symbolic ritual dunking, an act of confession and a token of genuine repentance for one's wayward ways; in order to get straight again with God and others. The symbolic gesture of the literal dunking was meant to portray not just a cleansing of one's dirty old soul; but a renewal that could transform someone – along with the world around them – and set them off in a new direction.

And at the heart of John's proclamation was this: It had nothing to do with who you were, but about the One who is coming, and is indeed "very near." It's about what the One who is coming with "water and Spirit" can make out of you; even if you got about as much going for you as a "stone!" So it is that John says three things:

The only thing that matters is what you do; which includes what you do differently than what you've done before – about straightening the crooked ways. Another way he puts it: Wanna flee from the coming wrath? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Get real, with what really matters.

Second: Don't presume your position and pedigree – descendants of Abraham, the great father of the faith – counts for anything. "God is able to make children of Abe out of stones." In other words, your prior perks are as worthless as a rock. Maybe worse, it's a weight could slow you down, and you'll miss the boat (in this case, the kingdom of heaven, the imminent reign of God); which is to be the imminent, ultimate fulfillment of the ancient hope and promise.

Matthew depicts this message in terms of harsh judgment; a "winnowing fork" cutting large swaths through the harvest of the end time, before the chaff is tossed into unquenchable fire.

If that kind of warning language was much of a religious motivator in those days – and it still is in some of the more fanatical belief systems of every stripe today – I can tell you it doesn't really scare me all that much. I pretty much believe you reap what you sow. There's nothing hidden that shall not be revealed. And the righteous still suffer; but not as much as the poor and persecuted -- or even the persecutors for that matter in their own sort of miserable existence.

I was reminded of this yesterday, news out of Fresno, where the Episcopal Diocese of San Joaquin and its archconservative bishop finally voted to sever its ties with the larger Church. The vested interests of the ecclesiastical authorities have long dismayed over the liberal direction of the American branch of the world-wide Anglican Comm. Now they'll align themselves instead with other fringe groups or renegade Anglican types who claim to be the only ones clinging to the true faith.

It may not come as a shock to any of you who know me very well at all that I was unable to conjure up much dismay about the further disorganization of the "organized" Church. Earlier in the month, this particular bishop was quoted as having told a gathering of reporters that the consecration of an openly gay bishop in 2003 was merely a "flashpoint" for those who had had "enough because of the liberal theology of the Episcopal Church."

"Those who want to remain Episcopalians," he said, "but reject the biblical standards of morality, the ultimate authority of the Bible, and the biblical revelation of God to us in His Son as the only savior of mankind, will in the end be left solely with a name and a bureaucratic structure."

Personally, I find reducing the living Word of God to a book about morality, authority and an exclusively-proprietary plan of salvation to be problematic, presumptuous, blasphemous, and therefore even dangerous in its own form of religious bigotry. The hope and promise of the Bible is a far greater vision to be sought and found, longed for and expected.

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A dissenting voice to yesterday's diocesan convention and their schismatic vote came from a parishioner, named Samantha Bland (of all things). A printed news story reported she'd urged fellow delegates to instead focus on teen pregnancy, soaring foreclosure rates, methamphetamine addiction and dwindling resources plaguing the local Central Valley congregations; instead of what she called "this distraction."

So who's to say who's right?

Next week, the answer might actually be found in the ensuing gospel passage we'll read from Matthew; when Jesus replies to John the Baptist's disciples, who've asked him if he is the expected Messiah of God and fulfillment of the ancient hope and promise. "Go and tell John what you hear and see," Jesus says.

The Advent season is a time for hope and promise. It is a time, as Brueggemann says, to "clarify the promises of God that have been spoken over us, and to decide if we dare to look at those promises seriously. If we cannot locate the promises, or if we do not trust the promises, then Advent is an empty, silly gesture."

Advent is a time and season of "finders keepers." This next week will be about further locating those promises, honestly asking ourselves if we dare trust the promises to be fulfilled in the face of such seeming contradiction, and asking ourselves how we could be a part of that living hope and promise.