

## ROOM FOR HOPE

12/8/19 ~ St. Andrew's Episcopal Church, Encinitas, CA

Advent 2 (A): Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

"You brood of vipers!" Every time this reading comes up in the lectionary, I'm thrilled; I love this vivid image of John the Baptist. Standing there in his camel's hair clothing with the leather belt cinched around his waist, eating locusts and wild honey, shouting in his booming voice; he is so undomesticated. In my mind, he's a darker-skinned version of Chris Hemsworth who played Thor in the movie from Marvel Comics.

I'm normally not a Superhero kind of gal, but there was something about the Thor movie trailers that made me want to see Thor for myself. So, two years ago, when a friend asked, "So, how are we celebrating your birthday?", he raised his eyebrows in shock, when I replied, "Let's go see Thor."

That might be why so many people were getting baptized by John. Like the Thor in the movies, John the Baptist is this larger-than-life, swarthy guy, who is completely self-confident—maybe we'd even call him, "brazen". I mean you don't go stand in front of a group of Pharisees and Sadducees—also coming for baptism, by the way—and proclaim, "You're a brood of vipers!" without a very healthy-sized ego!

And, yet, John actually presents quite a paradox. As committed as he is to this work of baptizing by "water for repentance", and as uncompromising as he is, he was also quite MAG-nanimous. On one hand—on some level—it's John's ego-driven self that chooses this path of being out in front of people, making bold statements, and using his charisma to evangelize. On the other hand, he absolutely understands it was he who was chosen by God for this work, rather than him choosing it.

We know this, because he explains, "One who is more powerful than I is coming after me...he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire". So, in the same way that Mary had to say "yes" to carrying the Christ-child, John has also said "yes" to lay the ground-work for the coming of Christ. In both cases, that's a huge "YES"! And, in both cases, that giant "yes" involves a whole lot of self-sacrifice.

We'll talk more about Mary's sacrifice in the weeks to come as we approach Christmas. But this week, I want us to think about what kind of commitment it would take for John to have experienced such glory, to have such a following, to be the "rockstar of the desert" and, then, to completely step aside, and make room for the real star to assume center stage.

John had to make room for Jesus, likewise, during this season of Advent, we explore how we might make room in our hearts—room to not only let in Christ's love, but to let in...even to expect and welcome...hope and joy. I have to think that's got to be the only way John the Baptist would be so willing to step aside and make room for Jesus. John was fully committed to the work he himself was doing; he believed it was his calling and that it was beneficial to others, fully knowing, something even more important was on its way. John must have had an enormous amount of hope.

I found an intriguing definition for hope the other day. I've been reading a little book by Richard Rohr called, *Preparing for Christmas: Daily Meditations for Advent*. Rohr, who is a Franciscan friar and Catholic priest, suggests that when we call out, "Come, Lord Jesus" in our prayers, that that inherently requires the virtue of hope.

He describes the virtue of hope as “the patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution.”<sup>1</sup> Isn’t that interesting? “The patient and trustful willingness to live without closure, without resolution,” and, he continues, “still be content and even happy because our Satisfaction is now at another level, and our Source is beyond ourselves.”

Some of you may have already read our latest newsletter that was mailed this week. It’s filled with stories of people who could’ve given up, but didn’t; stories of how people’s faith journeys brought them through dark times and back into the light; stories of people who made room for the possibility that in the darkness they would find hope.

Included in that issue is a review of the book *Factfulness*. We included it, because in the midst of these polarized times, it can seem like our whacky world is the worst it’s ever been. And, if we buy into that rhetoric, we will become more fearful, fight harder for our own security, and look the other way when we see someone needs help.

But what’s affirming about this book, *Factfulness*, is that the authors point to the realities of our lives today. Yes, many things still need improving, and we’ve become aware of things that we thought were fixed, but are not. And, yet, the reality is most of us live a much better life than people a couple of generations ago. To see that, to seek that knowledge, and to commit to being part of the ongoing change to better things, is to have hope.

This morning’s reading from Isaiah, true to the genre of that prophetic voice, is filled with hope. Part of the hope is expressed, as Richard+ pointed out last week, in the way Matthew describes John the Baptist pointing back to this description in Isaiah: “the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins,” to strengthen the connection from Moses to Elijah to John.

Isaiah persists by offering a hopeful image of the future: “The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid.” There’s also imagery from the plant-world: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

Which, when you think about it, is also about making room. In order for us to imagine a wolf living with a lamb, we have to take that metaphorical image and expand our thinking to envision what it would look like for what have been proverbial enemies to coexist.

Then, moving into the more literal realm, let’s consider the room it takes for a plant to take root. The plant doesn’t just pop up out of nowhere, but pushes aside soil as it germinates, and then displaces more of the earth as the shoot emerges. Room has to be made for new growth...hope takes up space.

In the reading from Romans, the Apostle Paul also writes about hope “Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that...we might have hope.” The Isaiah images are reflected in his words as well: “May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another,” and then he actually quotes Isaiah lifting up the part about the root of Jesse, and ending with a beautiful blessing: “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.”

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<sup>1</sup> Rohr, Richard, *Preparing for Christmas* (Cincinnati: Franciscan Media, 2009), 2.

As I was ruminating on this idea of hope and making room for it in our lives, I saw an amazing thing on my drive into the office one day last week. There was a blind man jogging in the bike lane, heading west on Calle Barcelona. I know he was blind, because he was jogging with the white cane that visually impaired people use. He had attached a tennis ball to the bottom, so that it didn't get stuck as he swung it from one side, where it would touch the edge of the bike lane, to the other side where it would bounce off the curb.

I thought about how much he has to live in hope; how much faith he has to have in the people driving along that bike lane. Not only is that an astounding amount of trust in others, he had to develop a lot of hope in himself as he learned to rely on his other senses, and how to trust that white cane to measure exactly the amount of room he need to stay safely within that bike lane.

I think our Christian hope is like that...as our faith is deepened, we become more and more skilled at trusting the mystery—trusting a process that we aren't in control of, yet practicing what we can do to put ourselves in the best position to notice joy when it comes around.

In that same Advent book, Richard Rohr refers to a passage from the Book of John: the 'joy that the world cannot give' (John 14:27)", and explains that "the 'joy ~~that~~ the world cannot give' always comes as a gift to those who wait for it, expect it and make room for it inside themselves."<sup>2</sup> That's our task in the coming weeks: to lead with hope as we wait for the gift of joy, "expect it and make room for it inside" ourselves.

-AMEN

## **The Collect**

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

## **Isaiah 11:1-10**

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.

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<sup>2</sup> Rohr, 4.

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.

**Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19**

- 1 Give the King your justice, O God, \*  
and your righteousness to the King's Son;
- 2 That he may rule your people righteously \*  
and the poor with justice;
- 3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, \*  
and the little hills bring righteousness.
- 4 He shall defend the needy among the people; \*  
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.
- 5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, \*  
from one generation to another.
- 6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, \*  
like showers that water the earth.
- 7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; \*  
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.
- 18 Blessed be the Lord GOD, the God of Israel, \*  
who alone does wondrous deeds!
- 19 And blessed be his glorious Name for ever! \*  
and may all the earth be filled with his glory.  
Amen. Amen.

**Romans 15:4-13**

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.

### **Matthew 3:1-12**

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."