



## SERMONS THAT WORK

### Advent 2 – (A)

**[RCL] Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12**

### The God of Hope

God is the God of Advent. As we hurtle towards Christmas, this liturgical season encourages us to pause and ponder the Advent themes of waiting, expectation, repentance, and hope. Today's scripture lessons dig deep into these concepts, with Isaiah and the Psalmist both painting vivid visions of an idyllic future of universal peace. But before we get to the calm pastures where the wolf lives with the lamb, we must get past the rugged, sartorially questionable John the Baptizer and his message of repentance.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!" This is the cry of the prophet out in the wilderness of Judea. John, clad in camel skin and munching on locusts and honey, has strong words for the religious leaders who have come to be baptized: "You brood of vipers!" He calls them to repent with the ominous warning that the ax is ready to cut down every tree that does not bear good fruit. There is a certain kind of excitement and thrill in hearing the Pharisees and Sadducees get publicly chastised. The world around us today is full of people—Christian and non-Christian alike—screaming at each other, "Repent! Change your mind. Change your ways." Advent is certainly a time for reflection and penance. But our readings today remind us that God is the God of repentance, and God's vision of peace, hope, and restoration is always bigger than our own.

We catch a glimpse of the possible pitfalls of preaching repentance in the 2000 film *Chocolat*, which stars Alfred Molina as the mayor of a small French town who has taken on the responsibility for the population's morality. He edits the young priest's sermons with a heavy hand. Through sheer force of will, he attempts to reform an abusive alcoholic. But the most vexing object in need of reformation is an unmarried mother who has set up a chocolate shop, tempting his people during the season of Lent, a period that ought to be set aside for fasting and prayer. The mayor runs around, much like John the Baptizer, with a message of repentance for all who will listen. In the end, determined to do whatever it takes to drive out the temptation leading his people astray, he breaks into the chocolate shop to destroy the sugary goods. The mayor had a certain vision of the good life. He had a certain conception of what peace in his town should look like, and his hope was affixed to this image he himself had crafted.

Today's readings remind us that God's image of peace, hope, and flourishing is bigger than our own. In the Isaiah reading, the prophet paints a portrait of a world where natural enemies, predator and prey, will sit peacefully side by side: the wolf with the lamb, the leopard with the kid, the calf with the lion, and the cow with the bear. Even the snake will not harm the innocent child. Rabbi Eliezer, a prominent Jewish leader in the first and second centuries CE wrote that the wolf, lion, leopard, and bear could all be tamed through

human skill. But the snake is incapable of being domesticated and, by its very nature, remains a threat to all others. Isaiah's vision of peace is a world that can only be brought about through divine intervention, where even the snake's nature is transformed into a peaceable creature. This image is a bigger kind of peace than that which is possible through human will, skill, or ingenuity.

This theme of peace is picked up in Romans. The passage we encounter today comes at the end of Paul's address to two groups of Christians arguing over Jewish food laws. As New Testament scholar Beverly Gaventa points out, Paul takes the practical question of what food belongs on the table and answers it by identifying the theological issues at stake. There is a certain parallelism in this passage that demonstrates Paul's God-centered theology. The section starts with a statement about how things were: "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... ." Here, Paul speaks of steadfastness and encouragement, and then in the next sentence reminds his listeners that God is the God of endurance and encouragement. In other words, these things you think you know—forebearance and encouragement—belong to God, and they are bigger than you think. The rules in scripture that were in place around dietary restrictions are not dismissed. Yet we are reminded that what brings us to hope is not human effort, but has always been God.

At the end of this section, Paul makes a similar theological turn: "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." This idea of hope is bigger than we realize, and it comes from nothing we can do, but from God. God is the God of hope.

What does it mean to worship God as the God of hope? Whatever we hope for, we must remember that our hope belongs to God. We all hope for different things. And as we are filled with joy and peace in believing, that hope can be transformed and aligned with the things God hopes for. When we embrace God—by embracing each other, even amidst our differences—the substance of our hope is transformed to align with God's ever-expansive vision.

Yet, in the here and now, we still hope for different things. There is a corresponding urge within us to call others to repent, to convince others that our way is better, our hopes are holier, and that God is only on our side. But Paul's message to the Romans urges us not to force others to align with our own viewpoint. Rather, he writes that when there is joy and peace within the community, then hope can abound. For Paul, peace is not some kind of inner tranquility; it is concord and harmony between people who actively disagree with each other. His is not a message suggesting "let's all just put aside our differences and get along." Instead of hoping that others will conform to our way of doing things or seeing things, we catch a glimpse of a bigger, cosmic story. When believers live in harmony, joy, and peace, hope is transformed. God's story is a story bigger than we can imagine. God's story is bigger than anything we can do on our own.

Let us return to our vigilante mayor from the film *Chocolat*. In the process of breaking into the shop and destroying many of the confectionery items, a bit of chocolate accidentally falls into his mouth. Upon tasting the goodness of the chocolate, he consumes handfuls of sweets and breaks down in tears. The next morning, the chocolatier finds him passed out amidst the wreckage of her chocolate display. She extends to him forgiveness and understanding. He goes on his way a reformed man: the one who formerly preached repentance to all others, is now opened to a faith of love and mercy.

This Advent, as we light our candles of hope and peace—and as we eat our Advent chocolates—let us remember that God is the God of Advent, which means the God of hope. When we attune ourselves to lives of harmony and peace with each other, our hopes can be transformed. The call to repentance is not a bludgeon of judgment over who's in and who's out. Rather, the call to repentance is an invitation to remember that God is God. The call to repentance is an invitation to investigate within ourselves where we are obstructing peace and joy. The call to repentance is a call to remember John the Baptizer's full message: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near." The Kingdom of God is *here*. It is bigger and more expansive than we can possibly conceive. It is a Kingdom where any power we have is to be used to help those with less. In the words of the Psalmist:

“He shall defend the needy among the people;  
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.  
In his time shall the righteous flourish;  
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.”

Amen.

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