

In the Name of the Living God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

What is it that we most deeply hope for? What do we most long for, or expect in our lives for the present or for the future?

If we were to fill in the dots and draw the picture...if our deepest longings were to be fulfilled...what would the picture look like? What would it show of ourselves, of our world, and of ourselves in relation to those around us and to the world in which we live?

At the heart of the lesson from Matthew for Advent 2, and perhaps its overall theme, is the matter of hope. As usual, on this traditional John the Baptist Sunday, John appears as the one who prepares the way with talk of the nearness of the kingdom and a call for repentance. There is one who is coming, he says, and this expectancy shapes the narrative. In the same way, it addresses our own expectations...or at least, it should...as it also questions what dreams shape OUR images of the future.

Perhaps this even assumes we imagine a future at all. Is there any hope left in us?

Even in speaking for myself at times, I wonder. At least from time to time, we all wonder where the hope is. We touched on this thread last week..about how the faithful have heard these messages for thousands of years, and seemingly grow weary of the waiting. But our world is dying for this hope, never more than now, and one of the key tasks of the preacher is the passing on of hope.

"Open our eyes," we pray. Hope-filled dreams have a way of shaping what it is we are enabled to see, like lenses that train us to interpret and to act in the present. Each generation learns to dream the visions that are taught by those who have dreamed before and by those who are able to keep dreaming in the present.

To borrow a metaphor, every Christian needs to have a "hope chest." Show of hands, please: how many here know what a "hope chest" is?

Well, the lesson for today starts with the words, "In those days", and so begins a dream. A dream of not just about what is, but about what might be if God's reign might be as it draws near.

What is the dream, and what is the hope here?

Such dreaming has already been there earlier in the story, when Joseph, the first character in Matthew's story, is called to imagine what righteousness will look like in the light of God's promise. To know that promises will be kept is a way that hope is shaped. In John, we see just such a preacher who seeks to fill or even to create anew for us that "hope chest."

If the overall theme is one of hope, that theme is focused in two major sections of the lesson.

The first part is captured in the summary of John's preaching: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." The second part, beginning with "But when he saw.", appearing at verse 7, might be characterized under the themes of righteousness or judgment.

"The kingdom of heaven has come near."

"This is it!", John says. But just what is it?

If this is a way of talking about what God is doing in this world, what will that reign of God look like? Well, on this question, Christians have always disagreed, and even the existence of the four canonical gospels witness to that disagreement.

It is a matter of imagination or vision....again, something that our current world lacks in quantity.

Matthew is claiming that it has something to do with the coming of Jesus. But what does that have to do with the here and now? What does it have to do with those hopes that will shape our future? Isaiah's prophecy offers at least some proposals. We note the images of righteousness, of equity, of peace, the cessation of harm, the unity of all nations under the rule of God. How will we hear and expect the promises of God to be fulfilled yet today?

If that is not enough, then there is this matter of repentance. The kingdom is near, yet repentance has something to do with preparing the way for God's entry into our lives. The call for repentance signals that there is something wrong and there is a need for change. Repentance and its seal in baptism highlight a theme to be sounded repeatedly in Matthew, which is this:

God's power is present but it is not unrelated to what we do.

Matthew's gospel will later wrestle with issues of law and righteousness, of grace and works, of faith and responsibility. But, one thing is clear. In Matthew, the power of God calls for and enables a transformed new life of discipleship.

Repentance then directs our vision not so much to sorrow for the past, but to the promise of a new beginning. The prayer of repentance offered to God is not so much "I am sorry", as it is, "I will do better, by your grace". The promise of this lesson is that because God's reign is so near it has the power to bring about this new orientation of life.

Bingo. There is our hope, found in the promise. That because God's reign is so near, it has the power to bring about this new orientation of life.

The single greatest prayer that anyone can utter is asking...asking...God to make me into the person that God would have me be. That is the prayer of repentance, leading to our response to the promise of God. If the promises of God are a matter of grace and gift, then our responsibility is to then "bear fruit", which means, above all, not to be enslaved to the past, but to be open to the future and what God is doing and will do.

Repentance means to assume responsibility for the future and not to be tied to the past and to personal prerogatives. John says, "Do not presume" upon your status as children of Abraham. God is able to raise up new children, we are told...and as we have seen in the acts of mercy, justice, peace and love often...more, more than often...arising out of the children of God least expected.

Repentance and judgment are serious business, but one does not force fruit. Fruit springs forth out of a new orientation, out of knowing one's place as a child in God's promise. In baptism's call to such response as God's children, we experience the transforming power that links "being" (children of God) and "doing" (bearing fruit), between "faith" and "action." Matthew will hold this wholeness before us throughout the gospel. "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world". "Everyone who hears these words of mine and acts on them."

Hope for such wholeness is finally secured in the promise of the one who is coming.

So we return to the preacher in all of us. And our preacher imagination and dreams.

What is your vision? What is your hope? Do you dwell in the past and despair about what might be? Or do you live into that future where all that is named by the name of God and God's kingdom is located.

Will you move into this Advent season in hope and in the sure confidence that fruit is yet to come, that God will yet do a new thing among us? Promises are always a matter of hope.

And to hear God's promise again in this "one who is coming" is to be called to repentance.

To be so empowered to rethink, to re-imagine, and to reorder our lives by the power of God's presence, within the loving embrace of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen.