

Choosing Sides

We take the journey of Advent with a focus on some of the most cherished dreams and visions of humanity which are represented by the lights found on that wreath's circle. Hope opens the journey...hope that is not just optimism, but hope based on the sure and certain promises given by our Lord. The second step on the journey represents another fundamental dream or vision common to humanity...and a promise that God has made to us: that there shall be a time and place where violence and war, pain and suffering shall no longer be. As we enter this season of Advent, anticipating the birth of Jesus more than the return of the Christ, we still keep hoping that somehow the vast promises found in Isaiah may be fulfilled this season. In Isaiah 11 we find the timeless metaphors which express that deeply felt longing, those images which describe a day that seems unimaginably and terribly delayed. There are classic treasures of art and music which have fixed the metaphors firmly in our minds and hearts. There are paintings to stir the eye and oratorios to please the ear. We can gaze and listen with eagerness at wolves and lions, bears and sheep passively feeding together, being led by a tiny child who we know represents the infant messiah. We often send and receive these images at this time of the year as a greeting card with the message: "Have the most blessed of Christmases." But we look at the image, and we read the quote from Isaiah, and we feel this immense disappointment. This sort of peace is not available to us, and seemingly never will be. In this internet connected world, probably more than ever, the images we have are of terror stalking so many lands. Anger is dividing peoples and nations into armed camps waiting for the least spark to set off still another conflagration of pain and death, even in our own country and neighborhoods. It seems that in our world, wolves eat lambs and bears spit out straw to devour goats. It seems that power mean predator. So when Isaiah spoke of the child who would lead this change, how did he envision that it would occur? To Isaiah the coming of the messiah represented the coming of God's reign, God's appointed king over the people. This king was to rule the people according to the ways of YHWH, the ways the people had promised to obey. Psalm 72 states the hopes for this earthly kingship: "May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound." These are the attributes of the Messiah which Isaiah lists. These are the things the Messiah will use to lead the people out of darkness into the light because the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord." At this point in time, Isaiah still spoke a word of warning to those in Israel because the exile had not yet begun. In a land that seemed to be doing just fine, many were already living in darkness because the king and leaders were neglecting their roles as shepherds who would lead their people in the ways of the Lord to care for those who most needed help. They were simply looking out for themselves; they relished their power and prestige; they forgot about the widows and orphans and immigrants in their midst. That's why Isaiah spoke of the one coming who would set things right. He did this to give hope to the widows and orphans and immigrants who were already living their lives in the darkness of poverty and fear and hopelessness. And he offered it to them as a light that would lessen the oppressive burden of the darkness they had to endure. That's why the words of God through Isaiah still speak so powerfully to us—there is still this burden of darkness in the world and a need for hope. Yet we know that we will celebrate the birth of the child who came

to lead us—the promised one who is the light in the darkness in less than a month—so why does the darkness still seem so dark and the light so dim? This continues probably because the world and the powerful still do not follow the lead of the child who came. Those in control do not answer the call to justice and righteousness. The world continues where the powerful relish power and prestige without consideration for the harm to others. And many who claim to follow the child who came to lead them, participate in the systems of the world. In many ways this brings us to the gospel reading from Matthew this morning. Early in our journey with Matthew’s narrative John the Baptizer makes a couple of appearances. This is the first. Here he comes with his very harsh word to those religious leaders of the people, the Pharisees and Sadducees, who have come not only to listen to him, but to be baptized by him. The description given of John is of “a voice crying out in the wilderness” calling the people to repent. The text tells us many from Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to the area of the river Jordan, and in response to his call for repentance; they were confessing their sins and being baptized. John’s call was: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” When he sees the Pharisees and Sadducees, John’s word to them does not seem to accept their sincerity. He calls them a brood of vipers and tells them they must bear fruit worthy of repentance. And that is the key to finding the path to that peaceable kingdom. We have indeed been given the one to lead us, to guide us, to show us the path to having that vision fulfilled—we often just stumble along the way. Our lives are filled with choices; so very many choices. From one perspective, you could say everything we do is a choice. Those everyday, mundane choices don’t seem to faze us much. It’s the Robert Frost, “two-roads-in-a-wood” kind of choices that can stump us. We want to know where each road leads before we make such a momentous decision. Whether we like it or not, the message of Advent presents us with precisely that kind of choice: whether we will align our lives with what God is doing in our world, or whether we will simply go along with the way things are. Advent begins with the vision of hope for the world, a vision of looking forward. In the vision of the peaceable kingdom we are looking forward to something better than the injustice and violence and suffering all around us. We are looking forward to someone better who will set things right—for everybody. When we look forward to the kindness and generosity and compassion of our God being fulfilled for all the peoples of the world, we have to take a look at whether the kind of people we choose to be contributes to that coming into the world. The reality of our world is that we are confronted with the fact that this “something better” that we are looking forward to also affects our “everyday” lives. The Psalmist describes the “something better” that God’s agent will bring into this world in very concrete terms. That one will “defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy.” (Ps. 72.4). Over and over again scriptures bear witness to the faith that what God is doing in our world is about mercy that is tangible, compassion in action. It is about creating justice—that way of life that makes possible for everyone to thrive equally. It is about generosity and kindness, not just in spirit, but also in practice. To some, that may not be good news. Some would prefer to keep what God is doing in the world firmly in the realm of “a nice idea that makes you feel warm and fuzzy inside.” Like looking at those Christmas greeting cards. We’d rather not have to make the connection between our faith and our daily lives. This is the kind of disconnect which made John the Baptist’s issue those harsh words to those Pharisees and Sadducees by the River Jordan. We don’t know what these particular leaders were doing there. Not all the religious leaders were hostile to Jesus. But one thing is

clear from John's response—they didn't have a clue about what he was about. John was there to prepare the people for the coming of the Lord—which would be a time when wrongs would be righted, and injustice would be corrected. It would be a time when oppression would come to an end and violence would be no more. And what many who showed up for John's "revival" apparently failed to realize was that the coming of God's messiah and God's kingdom and justice meant they would have to change their ways—to "bear fruit worthy of repentance." (Matt. 3:8). Because they were all part of an unjust system, they would have to choose to change their ways or they would have to choose to ignore what God is doing in the world. Whether we like it or not, the repentance that God's justice confronts us with is about choosing sides; it's about where our allegiance lies. Of course, that starts with the kind of people we choose to be. But it also extends to what we actually do. Whether we like it or not, the coming of God's justice and peace into this world presents us with a "road not taken" kind of choice. If our allegiance is with the coming of God's justice and peace into this world, then we need to face a hard reality: that choice entail choosing not to continue pursuing the selfish ways of this broken world in our everyday, mundane lives. Choosing each day to pursue goals reflecting those of the child who came to lead us. In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit.