

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
“GOD’S PROMISE – MAN’S HOPE”
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
DECEMBER 5, 2010
Matthew 3:1-12, Romans 15:4-9, Isaiah 11:1-10
ALL SERVICES**

The time is urgent: the promise of the messiah beckons us, not so much to faith, as to hope. John the Baptist urges his hearers to prepare for the fulfillment of the promise made to their ancestors long ago.

The early Christians never wondered whether God was dead. Rather theirs was a problem of hope or its absence, despair. Where is the God whom we love? Where is the God who said he would be with us? In short, theirs was not a problem with faith but a question of hope.

If they were having trouble with believing, John the Baptist and Isaiah would have warned them to see, to prepare for the fulfillment of the promises they had received so long ago. Isaiah appealed to the Israelites’ yearning hope in reminding them of the dream which had sustained them so many times and which the psalmist, David had so eloquently prayed.

It was as if the Prophet Isaiah said to them, *“Do you feel discouraged by constant war and bickering? Well, let me tell you about a time when our God will come to our aid, when our God will make a new way for people to live together. It will be a time when the lamb can lie down with the lion ... and if that is not enough, there will come a time when from the very ancestry of Jesses, a savior will come to fashion us into a people of peace and justice.”*

There was a time when we used to think that hope issues from faith; that is, if we believed in Jesus we would hope for his return. Now, in our time, we are challenged more to hope for what we already believe. Advent pushed us to prepare ourselves for what God has promised us.

How we are to hope forms the core of what John the Baptist preached to his people. To hope, he claimed, is to reform your lives in order to be on the watch in expectation, to be on the lookout for any sight of Jesus' return in the midst of the absence and the silence.

The anguish of our age is not so much that we question God's existence; rather we wonder whether God is on vacation. Why is God so absent from our world? Somehow God has to be **"smoked out,"** forced to talk. This the Jews did not hesitate to do, but we – maybe as a concession to politeness – avoid reminding God of our hopes, our dreams ... which are God's dream as well.

So we join the psalmist, in the midst of our anguish, in calling upon God to give good judgment to the king, to soften our leaders to be responsive, especially to God's special ones. If God were inspiring the king, then the royal leader shall have pity for the lowly and the poor; the lives of the poor he shall save. Justice shall flourish in his time.

The courage of such hope calls God to be characteristically God in keeping with his word, fulfilling his promises. This bold hope is almost blasphemous in that it rejects God's apparent decision to be silent; it demands that God act in the way he said he would.

We believe that God comes to us in Jesus, but do we have the courage to hope that he would come back after his first visit? Is that not part of the Advent message? After all, we do believe that Jesus came over 2,000 years ago ... but do we dare hope he would come again even into the desperation we may experience? Hope for such a return requires both courage and patience, as Paul advises the Christians at Rome.

If we have the courage and patience to be on the watch for Christ's presence, then we put ourselves on the alert for his return. Since we know that our God has already come to us in Jesus, God has irreversibly committed himself to our cause and uttered the word of Christ Jesus. Hope, then, is the demand that God keep his word, **"as you promised to the patriarchs forever."**

The Jews knew God by the faithfulness to his promises. They believed that whatever he promised, God would be faithful. The gentiles, however, come to know God by his mercy, as Paul tells us. The mercy we experience ushers us into the mystery of God's faithful promises, fulfilled in Christ Jesus and extended to us in the promise of his return. To recognize Jesus' presence, John the Baptist shouts

that we must be in a posture of waiting, freed of distractions, with eyes open; in short, we must reform our lives.

What are we to be ready for, then? According to Matthew and Paul, we must prepare for salvation, the coming of the kingdom of God. The hallmarks of the kingdom are justice and healing, community and harmony, courage and hope. Those who feel they have a special place merely by their social status or their ancestry, John warns need to hear the message again.

The messianic times, the time of the kingdom, will be marked by healing from brokenness where life has been shattered. It will be a time when we will lose the burning desire for revenge, for getting back at those who have harmed us. It will be time teeming with the hospitality implied in Isaiah's dream: when enemies will welcome each other warmly. It will be a time when nations put themselves at the service of the poor, when the king – or other rulers – will be more concerned about justice than about arms.

Are we ready for it? Do we have the courage, the patience, and the strength?

The Baptist announces a water baptism as preparation for the kingdom. We hesitate – the water may be cold and there is a motley crew in front of us. But if we find ourselves in any way wounded, broken or shattered; if we find our world desperately in need of peace, yearning for a reason to hope, then there is no time to hesitate, there is no time to wait. **“Reform your lives!”** shouts that man in the desert. Our God beckons us to hope for the dream we believe in. The new life is now, it cannot wait.

You cannot afford to wait til next Sunday. If you agree with that sentiment, you are ready for Advent. And if you believe that you need the Lord in your life right now, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church in this season of advent.