

Second Sunday of Advent, Year A--2010

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm: 72:1-2, 7-8, 12-13, 17; Romans 15:4-9; Matthew 3:1-12

Hope's Two Daughters: Anger and Courage

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Throughout the Advent season we are invited to renew and deepen our hope. St. Augustine once wrote that "hope has two lovely daughters: anger and courage: anger at the way things are, and courage to see that they do not remain the way they are." Let's consider what today's readings tell us about our Christian hope, and about the place of hope's "daughters," anger and courage, in our lives.

First, hope. In the reading from Isaiah we hear that Israel is on the verge of being politically wiped out as a people. Assyria has invaded and gotten all the way to the walls of Jerusalem. The reign of the mighty line of King David, often compared to one of the giant cedar trees of Lebanon, has been cut down to a stump. But Isaiah holds up the hope that a new king will sprout like a shoot from this stump, bringing new life to Israel. This king will be wrapped in God's Spirit and endowed with the wisdom and understanding needed to lead God's people. He will rule with justice for all and with special compassion to the poor. As Israel faces destruction by war, this king will bring the fullness of peace.

The promises held out by Isaiah are astounding. "The order of nature" that we learned about in science class, where the big fish eat the little fish, will be overturned. The wolf will be a guest of the lamb, the calf will browse with the lion

and in a really amazing image, a little child will play by the cobra's den without being harmed. Isaiah's hope is that the rules of life will be changed, bent in the direction of gentleness and peace. The new king will abolish all threats to the poor, the weak, the children. Isaiah holds up hope for a new world of peace that will be safe for all of us, especially the vulnerable.

These are powerful words for this Advent season! Do we dare hope they can be trusted as we keep hearing that economic downturn has made so many unemployed, about the wars Iraq and Afghanistan, and as we face illness or loss in our personal lives? There is a huge contrast between important parts what is actually going in our world and this hope for a truly peaceable kingdom.

I think it is why St. Augustine says anger is one of the daughters of hope. Listen to John the Baptist. The Baptist is one of the great figures of hope in the Bible. Repeatedly he announces that "the kingdom of heaven is at hand." This is the kingdom that Isaiah pictures with the lions and lambs, a child and a cobra playing side by side. John the Baptist knows that this is not the way things are in the Israel of his day, and he is very angry at those causing the injustice and violence. His words are harsh. He calls the leaders of Israel "a brood of vipers." He thunders judgment against the contented and powerful. He proclaims that the messiah—the Christ—who is coming after him will winnow the good from the bad and throw evildoers into the fire. John's anger is the daughter of his hope.

This relation between hope and anger leads St. Thomas Aquinas to say that anger can actually be part of a virtuous Christian life. Without hope, the Baptist would simply shrug his shoulders as say, “What can you expect? That’s the way the world works.” Instead he angrily challenges people to change and to live in ways that make the peaceable kingdom a reality. John’s anger is the daughter of his hope-filled conviction that the peaceable kingdom really is possible.

Courage is also a daughter of hope. In today’s second reading Paul calls God the “God of encouragement.” Belief in God and God’s kingdom is the parent of the courage that was so visible in Jesus life as he went forward proclaiming blessed are you poor, blessed are you peacemakers, even when he faced threats of death. The Advent hope we hear in Isaiah can give us the courage to work for a world more like the peaceable kingdom.

During Advent we are waiting for the coming of Jesus Christ and the fulfillment of the dream of peace from long ago. But what we do matters. We need to keep at it with courage. We need to listen to Isaiah’s promise that a new way of living is really possible. There are signs of that new life already visible in the courageous action of all who are working for greater justice and true peace. Hoping in that promise and seeing those signs can give us give us the hopeful courage to re-shape our lives and communities with the peace Isaiah proclaims.