

**December 4, 2016, The Second Sunday of Advent, Grace Cathedral
Isaiah 11:1–10, Romans 15:4–13, Matthew 3:1–12**

“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.”

Oh, don't we wish?

Wouldn't it be wonderful to get a great big dose of hope, kind of like a blood transfusion or (even better!) a bulk purchase of dark chocolate?

Something that would help us to go on, to find our way in the darkness, to come to a place where “joy and peace in believing” feel real?

Maybe that's why some of us have come up this hill this morning – to search for some hope that is a bit more solid and lasting than what's on offer down in Union Square.

The trouble with hope, though, is that we can't get it by wishing.

Hope is that strange thing that we Christians call a virtue.

Which means it is a disposition of the heart, a quality of the imagination, a way of living, that only comes into being in us and in the world in so far as we practice it.

We become hope-full – full of hope – by hoping, just as we become a skilled parent by parenting, or a great tennis player by playing tennis, or a wonderful cook by cooking.

Most of us start out being terrible at hoping and we get better bit by bit, as hope itself increases in us.

And hope spills over into the world only through our concrete practices of hoping, carried out over time for the sake of making the world a more hopeful place.

Hoping is a hard thing to do, and it's risky.

It makes us vulnerable, because hoping is about things that are terribly important, and we are likely to be disappointed.

It's so hard to hope that mostly what we do is wish instead.

Wishing is so much safer – wishing takes us away from reality, into a place of airy castles that never come tumbling down; wishing is a flirting with what might be so, a playing around the edges of new possibilities.

But as my grandmother used to say, usually as she was rolling up her sleeves and reaching for a saucepan, or jamming on her hat and heading for the door, “Well, wishing won't make it so.”

Hoping is much more likely to make it so.

Hoping is what we do when we look up at the star of wishing as it twinkles in our sky, let it light a candle in our heart, and then start taking one step at a time, carrying the light, steadily moving forward towards the place to which it points us.

I think our God is above all a hopeful God, a God who hangs stars in our skies and then encourages us to start walking by their light towards the divine vision that they illuminate.

“In those days,” our Gospel this morning tells us, John the Baptist appeared.

And his message was like a bucket of cold water for the people who were indulging in vain wishing.

“Those days,” when John came on the scene, were bad days for the people of Israel – occupied and oppressed, crushed under the boot of the Roman Empire.

John preached the need for people to repent – do a total turn-around in their way of living – in order to respond to the kingdom of God that he saw breaking in on his people’s benighted lives.

He baptized in the Jordan to give people a tangible sign of their commitment to turning-around and beginning the practice of hoping for something new.

And a whole lot of people took him up on it, including some pretty unlikely characters – soldiers, tax collectors, collaborators, all kinds of riff-raff – all of whom John baptized without any questions asked.

But then the religious leaders showed up, and John really lit into them: “You brood of vipers!” Because basically they were just trying to hedge their bets.

They were willing to be baptized just in case John was on to something with this vision of God’s kingdom, but what they really put their trust in was their inherited religious privilege.

“We have Abraham as our ancestor.”

“Dream on!” retorts John, “Wishing won’t make it so. All that counts in God’s eyes is whether you move from wishing to hoping, and make a real change in the way you live your lives.”

That was “in those days,” but what about “in these days”?

“These days” – which are dark days, whichever way you look at them.

I’m not talking about party politics here, because I don’t need to.

I’m talking about the nest of vipers that is visible to all of us, now we’ve collectively lifted up the rock.

I’m talking about the deep fault-lines that divide us, that separate us by race and class, by ethnicity and education, by sexual orientation and religion, by wealth and poverty, by where we live, by age and gender.

“These days” are days of division and bitterness, days of conflict and uncertainty, days when the lives of black and brown people and the water rights of native people and the dignity of working people are being thrown under the bus, days when our highest ideals are crumbling in our hands, days when it seems like money can buy anything at all except what we really need, days when the sheer magnitude of the world’s problems overwhelms us.

And “in these days” we need to move from hand-wringing and hopelessness, from closing our eyes and retreating into our relative privilege, towards repentance and active hoping.

That star of wishing needs to come down to earth in our lives and become the candle of hope – a living flame that needs sheltering and care, and which is a whole lot more trouble than just wishing on a star.

Because real hope cannot be bought, except with the currency of vision and action.

Real hope only happens when we live hopefully, through particular actions, for the sake of a compelling vision of the way things could be different.

The virtue of hope that we are cultivating can only become a force that shapes our Christian character, and a force in the world that changes everything, through specific actions done by particular people, by us.

Today God jumps-starts this work by providing us with the compelling vision we need, the bright star towards which we are called to walk, cradling our fragile little candles of hope.

That vision is found in Isaiah's picture of the righteous branch of Jesse, the leader who stands as a sign to the nations.

A leader whose justice and righteousness, whose breathtaking integrity, is in absolute contrast – not with any singular political leader (let's not succumb to crass and easy finger-pointing here) – but with ALL political systems, ALL economic systems, ALL social systems whose aim is division in order to conquer, and domination of some by others.

The vision offered to us this morning stuns us with its inclusion, with its overcoming of differences and hostilities that we can so easily think of as “natural” and insurmountable.

The image of the animal kingdom that Isaiah uses (wolf and lamb, leopard and kid, lion and cow lying down together, and a little child leading them), is even more powerful when we apply it to the human world:

“Black and White shall live as neighbors, Native American and Asian-American and Latino shall dwell in harmony. The farmer and the technologist and the manufacturing worker shall find prosperity together; the Muslim and the Christian shall set up shared communities; men and women, straight people and queer people shall come together for the common good; and a little child shall lead them. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain.”

Our desire for that kind of unity across difference has to be more than wishing.

Our hope for the life-giving freedom of God's kingdom has to lead us to practice resisting the death-dealing structures of the world.

Having glimpsed God's promise, we need to turn ourselves around and move from wishing to hoping, by finding the particular actions that each of us is called to practice.

Peace on earth is an enormous star of a Christmas wish, but living peacefully where we find ourselves is a manageably difficult Advent hope, which we can tend with particular actions, with particular people, in particular places –places like Grace Cathedral.

I remember more than twenty-five years ago, when I served as clergy here, the children and young people of the cathedral wrote a play and performed it here in the Nave.

They portrayed a group of lost children on pilgrimage, searching for a bright-feathered bird that had led them up a mountain to a ruined temple.

They walked down the aisle wondering if this could be the place where they would find their bird.

They met the Dean on the altar steps, where they sat and talked together about their hopes and dreams, and suddenly the bright bird flew out of the pulpit (on a long kite-pole!) and danced above their heads.

I wonder what it would be like if the memory of those children could lead us?

It's been a long time since I served here, and so I hesitate to say "us," and "we," and to speak about specifics, but perhaps you might indulge me because of my great love for this cathedral, and my high estimation of what could be possible here?

Because I wonder if, "in these days," Grace Cathedral could become one particular place in the world where wishing really is turned into hoping by the lives of hopeful people?

I wonder if this cathedral could become a sanctuary on a holy mountain, a place in which people of all kinds could come together to practice the virtue of hope by learning how to listen and speak across divisions, by sharing God's vision and acting on it together, by really meeting each other in their differences?

I wonder if the Peace exchanged in worship could become peace that is put into the hands of every person who enters these doors, and many, many who remain outside them?

I wonder if, because we practice taking the risk of coming forward each week with open hands, trusting that God will come to meet us here and feed us with God's very self, we could learn to take the risk of meeting strangers with equally open hands?

I wonder if the star of wishing could come down to earth right here, and become a candle of hope lit in all of our hearts, whose flame we tend, and whose light we carry out into the darkness of our world?

"May the God of hope fill us with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."