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St. James', Mt. Airy
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Advent 2A
Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

**Gracious God, take our minds and think through them;
take our hands and work through them;
take our hearts and set them on fire.
Amen.**

Pay attention to the fine print of hope¹, for the beginning is near.

Hope. It can be such a nostalgic word, one we relegate to the world of childhood, to wishes and dreams that spring forth, before our experience of the world, teaches us that to hope is a foolish thing.

And yet, I would be hard pressed to come up with many words more central to the Christian life of faith – and to the season of Advent – than hope.

To hope is to cherish a desire with anticipation; to expect with confidence. At its core, to hope is to trust.

When you trust, you know you are never alone, for trust involves relying on someone or something other than yourself. And so, trust is **to faith**. Yes, I just made that a verb – **to faith**.

¹ Steven Charleston, a line from one of his daily meditations posted to Facebook.

Faith as a noun can be understood as having a relationship of trust with God and others, and a belief in the reality of grace. So, **to faith** can be seen as the cultivation of relationships of trust with God and others, and an active expectation and preparation for the reality of grace in life.

To hope – to trust – to faith. These are our response to the unconditional love God so abundantly gives to us.

It's almost a trinity of sorts – to hope – to trust – to faith. They circle back on one another, and are at the same time both a distillation, but also an amplification, of each other – or to use theological imagery, they magnify each other – magnify us – magnify God.

This is the fine print of hope.

And, this is why we pay attention to hope in Advent. For it is hope, and its fine print, that help us get ready to come close to the Mystery, and provide a lens through which we encounter again the sacred stories we tell in preparation of, the incarnation.

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A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Today's passage from Isaiah tells of the hope of a prophet who has watched Israel, the northern kingdom, fall to the Assyrians in part due to the machinations of Ahaz, king of Samaria, the southern kingdom.

Isaiah longs for, hopes for, a righteous ruler from the line of David who will usher in justice and peace across all creation. Ahaz is not that ruler, and so Isaiah proclaims words of judgment.

The verses that immediately precede our reading for today tell of God lopping the boughs of the tallest trees, hacking down the thickets of the forest. The tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low. This is the setting for the new shoot that shall grow from the stump.

This is how hope gets a start – it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place.²

Isaiah looked with anticipation, with hope, for the one upon whom the Spirit of the Lord would rest – the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

We understand this text to be a messianic oracle. The expectation of an anointed one who would usher in the peaceable kingdom where the wolf shall live with the lamb and the leopard shall lie down with the kid – the final consummation of God's kingdom.

And for us, this hoped-for messiah was found in the one called the Christ, whose coming as a baby, and as a judge, we anticipate in this season of Advent.

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In our reading from Matthew today we encounter John the Baptist who is preparing the way for that Christ.

² *Feasting on the Word Year A*, Volume 1, pg. 28.

With his call for repentance, his angry shout of “*You brood of vipers!*”, and his images of the coming messiah as one with an ax before trees, and a winnowing fork in his hand to separate the wheat from the chaff, John does not appear to have been the most hopeful prophet.

And yet, at its root, what John was proclaiming was the fine print of hope – both trust and faith. He called out in anticipation of the coming one, relying on God's promise, alive with the expectation of the outpouring of God's grace, while cultivating holy relationship with God and community.

John knows that a beginning is near, and that in order to come close, you must prepare, you must make paths straight in your heart and your life.

In this light, repentance is an act of hope.

What John reminds us, is that repentance is not primarily about our moral worthiness, but rather about God's desire to realign us to accord with Christ's life; repentance is not so much about our guilt, as about God's power to transform us into Christ's image.³

John knows that when the beginning arrives, the world will be transformed.

In this light, Christ wielding the winnowing fork is the hope-filled fulfillment of Isaiah's oracle – the one who shall have the spirit of wisdom and understanding, and who will judge with righteousness.

^{3 3} *Feasting on the Word Year A*, Volume 1, pg. 46.

What John points us toward, is the end of the world as we know it, and the in-breaking of God's reign – the fulfillment of which includes both true justice and peace through the transformation of all creation.

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Advent calls us to respond to these prophets – to the invitation of preparation and anticipation, to the sacred stories that encourage us into deeper relationship, to the fine print of hope.

And make no mistake, our response is what we are called to give, it is what God hopes for.

How will you hope, trust, and faith in the coming weeks? Where might the tendrils spring forth for you? What are the ways that you will make paths straight in your life and the world around you? When will you make space and time to repent? How will you prepare for the birth of God among us in your home, in your heart, in your relationships?

As we once again get ready to come close to the mystery of the incarnation, may we greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer, abounding in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit, for the beginning is near.

~ AMEN ~