

Advent 2, December 15, 2019 (texts are Advent 2, date is Advent 3)
(Mt 3:1-12; Ps 72:1-7, 18-9; Is 11:1-10; Ro 15:4-13)

When I was in the Holy Land in 1996, one of our first stops was near the Jordan River, probably close to where John was baptizing.

Those stones (from children's time) are from that place. Our guide, my Hebrew professor from the seminary, read today's passage from Matthew, and I was moved to tears for the first of many times during that incredible trip. If God could raise up children to Abraham from rocks like these, what might God do to my uncertain heart?

A few moments ago we lit the candles of *peace, hope, and joy*, and we sang about a candle shining its light into the darkness of our lives and our world. Advent is a time of waiting for the *peace, hope and joy* that will be ours when Messiah arrives.

Last week we heard the Prophet Isaiah describe a time when **swords will be beaten into plowshares, and spears into pruning hooks, and the people shall not make war anymore. Come, O house of Jacob, he said, let us walk in the light of the Lord.**

Today's words from Isaiah continue that theme of peace. **The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard with the goat, the calf with the lion. The cow will feed with the bear and the lion will eat straw like the ox. . . . And on God's holy mountain, Zion, there will be no harm nor destruction, for the whole earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.**

Isaiah wrote in the eighth century before Christ—that would be almost 3000 years ago. We're still waiting, and hoping, that his words will come true.

Today's texts were used during Advent in 2004, and one theologian at that time penned these words: *Who here hasn't yearned for a world in which lambs hang out with wolves, and adders behave as though Mr. Rogers had taught them how to play with children?* A timely reminder of a genuinely good person whose story is portrayed in a newly-released movie.

Then the writer adds, *Which is more preposterous, lions eating grass or politicians looking out for something other than their own advancement?* (Frederick Niedner, *Christian Century*, November 30, 2004, p. 18)

Matthew's gospel talks about these "politicians," the religious ruling class comprised of the Pharisees and the Sadducees. They didn't *need* to seek their own advancement, because they were living proof that "God blessed the holy and righteous ones." They had the power, the authority, the places of honor at banquets, and the respect of most of the Jewish people.

Onto that stage steps John the Baptist. **Brood of vipers**, he calls us. Yes, *us*. The Pharisees and Sadducees he was speaking to were the *churchgoers* of his day. Everyone knew they were religious, because they worshiped faithfully in the temple, week after week, and they prayed many times a day. And their tithes and offerings clanked more loudly than all the small coins offered by the poor. They were the religious *elite*.

You brood of vipers! John cries. *You think you don't have to worry because Abraham was your ancestor. But you're more like the **serpent** in the Garden of Eden than like Abraham. You're deceitful and hard-hearted and self-satisfied. You need to **repent** like these other folk who come to be baptized.*

In those days, baptism had nothing to do with the forgiveness of sins, either retroactive or proactive. The people who came to John to be baptized were making a public demonstration of *repentance*. They had recognized the guilt of their sins against God's law, and by their baptism they showed they were willing to change their lives, to live more intentionally as God's chosen people—especially now that the kingdom of heaven had come near!

Look at me, they were saying as they were dunked in the Jordan River. *Look! You'll see! My life is going to be different from now on! My heart has changed, so my life will now begin to bear fruit!*

That's the scene Matthew painted about John the Baptist and **the people of Jerusalem and all Judea**—the common people, the humble working-class Jews. But those *religious* people, the temple leaders, *they* had nothing to repent of. They were good people. They observed the letter of the Law. *Everyone* knew that!

Of course, *John* knew their hearts. They *were* a **brood of vipers**. They clung to their laws and traditions, and compassion and kindness were foreign to them. *They* didn't need to be kind to widows, orphans, and foreigners, because *Abraham* was their ancestor, and that was good enough for them.

But, said John, when the biological children of Abraham are unfaithful, ignoring the good and gracious will of God—then *thank God* that **God is able to raise up children to Abraham** from stones.

As I read this gospel text during the last week, I've wondered where I am in it. Am I among the **brood of vipers**? Am I stuck in traditions and rituals that are meaningless when compared with the passionate, compassionate love of God in Jesus, our Savior?

Or am I like a stone? Do I rely on my baptism to save me? Do I diminish the sacrifice of Jesus by expecting and accepting “cheap grace”? How can I *ever* deserve the sacrifice Jesus made for me? The answer is, I can't. No one can. How could anyone live such a worthy life that it was right for God to die for us?

Thank God that God *does* have the power to raise up children of faith from stones! Thank God that the ax lying at the root of the tree is ready to cut off all the dead wood, leaving only that which will bear good fruit!

Because if our lives don't bear fruit worthy of repentance, we probably *aren't* repentant. And if we're not open to repentance, then we've become hard-hearted and arrogant, like the Pharisees and Sadducees. **Vipers.** **Stones.**

Thank God that in holy baptism we're *reborn* as part of the body of Christ! By the power of God—great enough to enliven the very stones—we are able to *turn away* from sin, and bear fruit worthy of repentance.

Baptism isn't just a ritual we perform so everyone can see the baby. Baptism is a life-changing event, transferring us from the kingdom of this world into the kingdom of heaven, which came near in the life and ministry of Jesus. *We have been sealed by the Holy Spirit and marked with the cross of Christ forever!*

I close with words from Steve Garnaas-Holmes, author of my online daily devotional, *Unfolding Light*:

Christ comes not to judge, not to condemn, not to leave anyone behind—but to heal: to heal souls and bodies; to restore relationships, families, communities, and nations; to heal the wound between us and God.

He comes to remove what impedes our love, to set us free from what imprisons our compassion, to restore our capacity to bless. He comes to make us whole.

What needs to be healed in your life? In your relationships? In your world? Open your heart to the deep, transforming, miraculous healing that Christ brings. The tender child, born among us and within you, brings infinite grace. Awaken your heart to the promise of healing. The Holy Child is coming.

End of quote.

Because of the coming of the Holy Child, God's love is now available unconditionally, freely. But you must change your whole life if you wish to receive it.

The coming Christ Child loved you so much he died for you on the cross. He came as a humble infant so as not to terrify you. He earnestly desires you in his heavenly kingdom—which is present here, now, in this lifetime.

So throw yourself into the loving arms of Jesus, into the gentle hands of God, his Father and ours. Let him melt you, mold you, fill you, use you to reach out and touch someone else who desperately needs the gift of his grace.

Thanks be to God!