

A Homily by the Very Rev. Dr. Renée Tembeckjian
Trinity Episcopal Church
4 December 2022
The Second Sunday of Advent
Isaiah 11:1-10, Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

“Flower Children”

I grew up in a place with a lot of steel, glass, iron, and concrete. There are green spaces, too, and a lot of waterfront, but when you look around New York (or any city, town, or village), what you see is mostly the hard stuff...

...because over decades and generations, countless acres of lush, rich farmland have been covered over, buried under layers and layers of material – first cobblestone, then concrete, asphalt, and tarmac. It is difficult to imagine that anything organic, any life at all, ever existed beneath the tough, hard surface of this life.

But every now and then, you notice a crack in the sidewalk, and you see a tiny sprig peeking out, a little bloom of some kind making its way into the light of the sun. Somehow, against all odds, an honest to goodness sign of life breaks through years and years of unforgiving surface.

Hope has a way of showing up in this life.

It is that same way in our own lives. Over years of personal history, we accumulate so many layers of pavement, as it were – disappointments or frustrations, heartaches or worries. We may feel the weight of time and experience – that we are too old or too unlucky for any new chapter to unfold in our lives, that it would be naïve to think we might still be surprised with something we hope for, wait for, pray for, or long for.

It can hard to trust that there is somehow within us, against all odds, a little sprig, a tiny bloom of some kind, just waiting to break through even the tiniest crack in the hard ground of our experience.

But Hope has a way of showing up in this life...as we hear today from the prophet Isaiah:

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

Isaiah is speaking in desperate and troubling times. The northern kingdom of Israel had fallen to the Assyrians, and those in the southern kingdom of Judea were certain they would be next. It was a dark time in the ancient world, one of fear and a growing dread.

We know that this not only the stuff of ancient days or faraway places. Many feel that our current age is too often dark and seems hard – personally, communally, nationally, and globally.

How remarkable, therefore, is the resonance and relevance of the ancient prophet, and how encouraging, then, is his vision: For Isaiah says that hope will, indeed, come...

...although not in the often-expected way. It does not come from the exertion of power – a mighty army or self-proclaimed king with a loud trumpet -- but from the likes of a tiny babe. Hope is born from a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and knowledge, a spirit of humility and respect.

And the impact of that spirit is so beyond our everyday sense of possibility, that it can turn our expectation upside down – imagine a wolf behaving like a lamb, or a calf emboldened like a lion, or our children – all children – safe enough to play absolutely anywhere, free of care and without a shred of fear, even near an adder's den.

Such is Isaiah's vivid, iconic image of the dream of God – a world so moved by divine promise, that nothing is ever the same. And he has quite a partner in the wild and woolly John the Baptist, who points to that same dream in his own pithy way.

If Isaiah dares us to *imagine* it, then John the Baptist is the voice that challenges us to live *into* it: Don't just sit around and *dream* of the hope, he says – make *ready* for it. Help it out. Prepare ye the way. Turn around (*repent*) from anything blocking that tender shoot of new life from breaking through the hardened layers of our own lives – our fixed patterns of thinking, habits of living, and history of choices.

And therein lies the beautiful mystery and *scandal* of Advent – that it is not merely the stuff of a single season, buried under generations of rock-hard, cemented theology. Advent is a living invitation to stay open to the surprise of new emerging life here and now, to trust that no matter what our age or circumstances, our story is not over, but only about to begin... and to imagine that new beginning from a place, person, or circumstances we might never have expected.

So, dream your Advent dream...and do your Advent work. Prepare ye the way...

...for just as you await the divine hope soon to break forth on a first-century night in Bethlehem, remember that even now, in your own twenty-first century life, a tiny flower of divine hope is just waiting to break forth within *you*.

Amen.