



Dreams and Nightmares

SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT
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Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor, for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Imagine this: an envelope arrives in your mailbox. It appears like any other holiday card. The envelope isn't green, red, or gold. It is a plain white envelope. When you open it, the card does not portray the holy family, a starlit night or a team of camels. Instead, there is a burly figure with a grim look on his face. It is your greatest nightmare! When you open it up the message is clear, and inescapable! It says, "Happy Advent, You Brood of Vipers!" Do you know who has signed it? *"John the Baptist."*

He arrives every year on schedule, the Second Sunday in Advent! This strange figure in the wilderness interrupts our festive preparations. He dresses like an ancient prophet in camel's hair and a belt around his waist. He preaches with sternness. He counters our extravagant dreamland of gift shopping, festive parties, colorful lights on our houses, blow up Santas and Frosty the Snowman in our front yards, and beautifully decorated trees inside our homes. Are we doing these things to prepare for Christmas or are we preparing to receive our Lord Jesus?

John diverts our attention from such things. He calls *"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near!"* This message sounds ominous! Is it a dream? Or is it a nightmare?

John the Baptist cites Isaiah, saying, *"Prepare for the way of the Lord."* The dream and hope of Advent is that God is drawing near. We are to make a way for God to come closer, to remove the roadblocks, straighten the highway, lift the valleys and leveling the mountains in our lives. There can be no excuses, only honesty. No more faking it or putting on

appearances. This is our spiritual work during this season. We are to replace the artificial with the truth, provide evidence that we are willing to be transformed by the love of God's direction and influence in our lives.

The Gospel invites us to gracefully surrender to God. With Jesus' coming, heaven moves toward us. Our ultimate hope is that Heaven can and will heal us. In the Old Testament lesson, although Isaiah lives in tumultuous times, he paints a picture of bounty and universal peace. Pay attention to what Isaiah says about the following pairs of animals. He says, the wolf shall live with the lamb. The leopard shall lie down with the kid. The calf and the lion will feed together. The cow and the bear shall graze and their young shall lie down together. The lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.

What did you notice about the pairs of animals? The predators lay down with their prey in peace and harmony. The lion eats grass like an ox? It is remarkable because of its absurdity. It is like a fairy tale. This is God's peaceable kingdom!

Isaiah's declaration stands in direct contrast to the terror, brutality, and nightmares that pervades the world of his day. The people of Judah were living a nightmare. To their north, Israel had been conquered and their capital, Samaria, besieged by Assyria. Judah was being threatened and they found themselves caught between Egypt and Assyria. It was a turbulent era of political instability. Assyria doesn't capture Jerusalem, but Isaiah foretells that Babylon will. The Babylonians not only take Jerusalem, they tear down the Temple, and exile the people to Babylon. So it is an era of major political shifts. Isaiah delivers messages of both judgement and hope to Israel and Judah. There was deep spiritual and social corruption, marked by outward prosperity masking internal decay, rampant injustice, idolatry, and hypocrisy, all under the shadow of the powerful, threatening Assyrian Empire.

Yet, Isaiah paints a picture of heaven on earth. Here we see a contrast of dreams and nightmares side by side. Isaiah prophesizes that someone will precede the coming of a Messiah. Isaiah also points to a time that Assyria will one day fall like a tree that will never sprout again. Then he turns to the house of David, which was also falling like a tree. But he says, from its roots, a branch will sprout. All is not lost for the people of Judah, because from the Davidic line will emerge from Bethlehem a king of peace and righteousness. He will lead his people with "*wisdom and understanding,*" "*counsel and might,*" "*knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*" The one who is coming is the promised prince of peace.

Centuries later, along comes John the Baptist. And Jesus who is born in Bethlehem. They, too, live during tumultuous times under the Roman government. The people are looking for a messiah who will rescue them from Roman oppression. Their suffering is caused by political domination, heavy taxation, and cultural/religious disrespect. The nightmare they live is like the nightmare the people were living in Isaiah's time.

The hope, the dream John proclaims is that the Lord is coming, the one who will be the bearer of the spirit of God. It was thought that the messiah would rescue the people from Roman oppression.

What are our hopes and dreams for our world? Are we living in nightmarish times? I think some would say yes. Others in our country would say, "*I'm living the dream!*" But what does "*living the dream*" mean, if God is only an ephemeral thought in your life? When circumstances suddenly change and life becomes a nightmare, what does one have to fall back on?

Isaiah tells of a time when war will be no more. His vision imagines a world with a truly righteous ruler. A political leader whose very being evokes justice, wisdom, and care for the weakest in the community. The dream is a world where absolute power does not corrupt absolutely. The repetition of the word "*spirit*" depicts this ruler as innately wise and appropriately subordinate to God.

But what about that "brood of vipers" mentioned at the beginning of the sermon? This is John the Baptist's critique of the religious leaders who joined the crowds for his baptism. These were the Pharisees and Sadducees, easily identified by their elaborate clothing. Curious, isn't it? They were attracted to John's revival. Was it the spectacle? Did they come out of curiosity? Were they hungry for an encounter with the Holy? We don't know. What we do know is that John did not grant them any special privileges. The Pharisees were the Law keepers, guardians of morality, purists in every regard — and they came to hear the preacher who dined on locusts. The Sadducees were the high brows, the liturgical elite, the religious nobility, and the families from which all the highest priests were named. As we heard today, John the Baptist wouldn't give them an inch preference. Their sense of privilege was not enough to put them on the right side of God.

Either we are living the spiritual life, or we aren't. Either we are responding to God's approach through a generous and holy life, or we aren't. Advent announces that God is drawing near. God is on the way. So, we prepare by changing our ways. We ask God to help us drop our bad habits, straighten out our souls, name the brokenness that has been lingering far too long within us, and present ourselves for healing.

The grace of God is right here, right now. And this is the good news of the Gospel.

In Jesus name, amen.