

The Promise of a Bright Future

Advent 2A

Text: Isaiah 11:1–10

December 2, 2007

The Promise of a Messiah

In his book, *The Kingdom Of God Is A Party*,

Tony Campolo tells about an experience he had
watching the closing ceremonies of the Olympic Games on TV
in his hotel room in Zurich, Switzerland.

As he sat there, Campolo watched the well organized parade of athletes
dressed in their uniforms
and carrying their national flags.

As the last team entered the stadium, all the athletes suddenly broke ranks—
they began running around and dancing with one another
in a spontaneous outpouring of enthusiasm...and good-will.

The neat columns exploded in celebration...
and all national and social identities were lost.
All divisions between humanity were wiped out.

All that could be seen was happy people hugging...and loving...each other.
There was only unspeakable joy.

It was, according to Campolo, a foretaste of the Kingdom of God—
a giant party—a great celebration of love.

Last week we heard the good news that God promises
a time when peace will reign over the earth—
a time when nations will no longer make war with one another.

Both the Old Testament and the New Testament proclaim the promise
that one day we will live in a world filled with God's peace.

The Old Testament looks forward to the reign of the coming Messiah;
the New Testament ends with the promise of his coming again.

During Advent, we are called to
take these promises seriously—
to look not only toward the coming of Christ at Christmas
but to the coming of a world in which God's Kingdom will come to fruition—
a world in which people will live in peace and harmony together
and Christ Jesus will reign over all.

But how will we get there?

Given all the conflict in the world today...among nations and peoples...
how can we ever hope to see that great and glorious day?

This morning, as we hear the second promise of Advent,
we hear God unveil his plan to fulfill that promise:

God will send a Messiah to save his people—

God will send an anointed one who will be the means by which the world is
transformed from a wasteland of hostility and greed...
to a kingdom of peace and well-being.

But as we look at this messianic promise of God,
we need to be very careful to do justice to the text
and to Isaiah's message of *messianic hope*.

As Christians, we see Jesus as the fulfillment of God's promise of a *messiah*.
We believe Jesus is the anointed one sent by God to save us.
We believe that through him
the Kingdom of God will be established upon the earth.

While we as Christians see Jesus as *the* Messiah—
the *cosmic Christ* who will draw all people into God's presence
—cue the soaring *Hallelujah Chorus* from Handel's *Messiah*—
the meaning of the word *messiah* in its Hebrew context
is not as cosmic or grandiose as we often imagine it to be.
In Hebrew, *messiah* simply means *the anointed one*—
literally *the one on whom the oil has been poured*.

The title *messiah* refers to anyone who is set apart by God for a specific purpose.
Isaiah calls Cyrus,
the Persian king who sets the Jews free from captivity in Babylon,
a *messiah*.

Given this duality of meaning, when we read these words in Isaiah
we not only hear the good news that
God has sent us *the Messiah* in Jesus,
who dies for our sins to give us life in God's Kingdom...
we hear the good news that God still sends us messiahs today.
God sends us people with visions of mercy and justice—
who show us the way to usher into the world God's reign of peace.

In his book entitled *Colors!*

John Aurelio tells the story of a young boy who had no home...or family...
finding a hermit's cabin hidden in the woods.

The hermit, who was revered for doing good deeds for others,
saw the boy, took him in...
and fed and clothed him.

The hermit also told him stories about the great saints and martyrs of the faith.
One day, the hermit told the boy he was going on a trip, and before he left,
he wanted to give the boy something special—it was a knife.

The hermit told the boy, *One day this knife may open heaven's gate for you*.
Then the hermit left,
and the boy never saw him again.

The boy began whittling with his new knife
and found it to be an extraordinary knife for carving.
He became so skilled he decided to become a wood carver
and honored God with his vibrant statues of the heroes of the faith.

One day after finishing an elaborate altar, the woodcarver died.
 When he reached the gates of Heaven,
 he found them locked.
 He tried to pick the lock with his knife, but it didn't work.
 He was confused because the hermit had said
 it would open Heaven's door!

Since he couldn't get into Heaven, he went back to earth.
 It was winter where he lived,
 a stormy...and difficult...winter.

The people of the town were freezing to death.
 They had used up all their firewood heating their homes,
 and they couldn't cut down any trees because the
 only ones allowed to own axes were the king's woodsmen.

The woodcarver knew immediately what to do.
 Using his knife, he cut off the arm of one of his statues
 and offered it to the people as firewood.
 The people were shocked that he would destroy one of his beautiful statues,
 and in truth it broke the woodcarver's heart to do it.
 But he knew how much the people needed the wood.

Throughout the winter,
 he cut up more and more of his statues to give away as firewood...
 and each time it broke his heart anew.

By the end of the winter,
 his life's work was gone—
 not one statue remained.
 It was then that the broken-hearted woodcarver
 found himself at heaven's gate once again,
 and this time the door opened easily.

Standing at the gate to welcome the woodcarver
 was the hermit along with
 all the saints whose statues the woodcarver had created.
 When the hermit saw the confusion on the woodcarver's face...
 he said,
Heaven's gate is opened only through suffering.

Brothers and sisters,
 heaven's gate has been opened for us
 by Jesus' suffering on the cross.

Advent is a time for us to discover anew
 that great love of God...
 and prepare for its power to be unleashed
 in...and through...our lives.

The Day of the Lord is coming!
That is the promise of God given today,
and we are the ones who are charged with the task of making sure
everything is ready for that great...and glorious...day.

As our lives are transformed by the power of God's love
given to us in the death and resurrection of
Jesus, the Messiah of God,
we are sent into the world to be *messiahs*—to be God's *agents of grace*—
who transform the world by living into the
grace, mercy and love of Jesus that has transformed our lives.

Messianic hope is still alive today—the day is coming when all people will
live together in peace and harmony in the Kingdom of God.
That is the very promise of God!

That kingdom of peace is promised to us in Jesus...
and it is unleashed upon the world in the lives of God's people—
through ordinary...everyday messiahs...
like you and like me.