

**Second Sunday of Advent – Year A
(Dec. 5, 2004)**

The Peaceful Kingdom

When I read that Gospel passage, I have the feeling that I might have had trouble liking John the Baptist. He doesn't seem to have been a very attractive character; he ran around in animal skins and he ate funny food: wild honey – well, that's not bad, but locusts and grasshoppers! Did you ever eat grasshoppers?

And then his message doesn't seem very encouraging: reform your lives, you sinners! Sounds like an evangelist preaching on the street corner and telling everybody they are going to hell if they don't change their ways.

And yet – and yet, it must have been effective since many people did repent their sins and came to him to be baptized, including some Pharisees whom he singles out for his greatest scorn: “You brood of vipers!” he calls them.

Well, as dire, as threatening, as unpleasant as John's message seems, it's important. It's as important for us today as it was in John's time. Our world is too obviously in need of conversion. It's a cold, cruel world we live in, full of violence, lacking in compassion and concern, badly in need of reformation if the Prince of Peace who preached love and compassion is to find a suitable dwelling place among us.

Now just suppose we were to take the Baptist seriously. What would the result be? I think the answer is in our first reading from Isaiah the prophet: the beautiful, idyllic picture, poetic imagery of the Kingdom of God, the peaceful Kingdom, the very Kingdom whose coming John announced: “The reign of God is at hand.”

Consider those famous lines that say:

“Then the wolf shall be the guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall browse together, with a little child to guide them. The cow and the bear shall be neighbors, together their young shall rest; the lion shall eat hay like the ox. The baby shall play by the cobra's den and the child lay his hand on the adder's lair. There shall be no more harm or ruin on all my holy mountain.”

It's another expression of God's dream, like the one we heard last week where Isaiah told us that God wanted all people to come together on his holy mountain to live in peace and harmony, where there would be no more wars, not even training for war.

Now what would it sound like if we were to translate those words into contemporary terms? Let's let our imaginations play a bit with God's dream and see what it might mean for our world today.

You could watch your favorite child or any child walk into a stranger's yard where there is an unchained pit bull terrier and have no qualms whatsoever. We could all walk anywhere, anytime on the streets of Washington without fear. Israelis and Palestinians would live together in peace and harmony. Justice and peace would prevail in Iraq, and American troops would come home. Racism, prejudice, and bigotry would disappear. In the Ukraine Orthodox Christians and Roman Catholics could join hands in mutual love and respect, and in this country Democrats and Republicans would be more than willing to cooperate for the good of all the people all the time.

This is God's dream. This is what God wants for our world. It's obvious from the visions of Isaiah the prophet and even more obvious from the teachings of Jesus. And yet, sadly, as we know too well, it is not reality. The cynic would say, "God's dream is a pipe dream." And don't we all often look around us at the problems that sometimes overwhelm us and say, "God, why don't you do something about it?"

Well, you know, when we are tempted to think that way, to ask that question, if we just listen hard enough, if we pay close enough attention, we might just possibly hear God say, "I did do something about it. I made you, and now it's up to you to make my dream come true." To me, to you, to all of us God says, "Be at peace, in your own hearts, and then help spread that peace around, in your homes, in your cities, in your nation, in the world, and then my dream will come true." The words of a hymn we sometimes sing are very appropriate here, "Let there be peace on earth and let it begin with me."