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St. Stephen's Church – Edina, Minnesota
9:00 and 11:15 Celebrations of the Holy Eucharist
The Second Sunday of Advent – December 7, 2019

“From Wish to Hope”

Scripture: Psalm 72 and Isaiah 11:1-10; 2 Advent A

I've noticed that the winter's cold only *seems* to chase away the furrer denizens of our neighborhoods. You know... the rabbits, the squirrels, the chipmunks, the raccoons. And while they may be more seldom seen this time of year, the fallen snow reveals the story of a largely invisible but incredibly lively world all around us. Rabbit tracks criss-crossing our yard and coming to our doorstep nearly every day. The telltale furrows of the squirrels that have scurried through the snow to reach a more distant tree. Amelia and I are quite sure we have noticed raccoons prints in the Memorial Garden of the church this week. And lately, the deer have found my back yard. Or at least now Britton and I can tell when they have been there foraging, since the snow captures their hoof prints for us to see.

Not long ago, as I was walking through my darkened home before turning in for the night, I wondered... could it be that those unseen deer were wandering in the yard right now in the night's near darkness? And I went to a rear window to look out, not really expecting to see anything. But there it was! A beautiful doe... barely visible but clearly outlined in the darkness just outside my window, leaving hoof prints in the

snow. She was so close. And it was sort of beautiful, really. Wintery. Quiet and mysterious and dark. And I called softly to Britton in the other room to come and see. And the doe immediately lifted her head upright and stood stock-still, listening, sensing the air. You could tell it was checking for danger. And I wanted to say, “No, don’t worry. I mean you no harm.” But as quickly as that thought came to my mind, the doe dashed along the side of the house and disappeared into the safety of the darkness... where I could notice it no longer. Gone.

And kind of sad... that in the presence of the powerful, the powerless often flee. That fear, not joy, is the energy that keeps them alive. Being noticed as little as possible is preferable to being known. That deer ran to survive, because it could not trust... me. And I wish the world was not that way.

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Speaking of wishes... Isaiah’s words are beautiful, are they not?

“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”

But really... can the lamb ever live in the notice of the wolf? Can the calf feel secure when the bear is nearby? Will the lion graze with the ox? Would I ever stick my hand into the snake’s dwelling without being entirely creeped out? Is Isaiah a lunatic for his ridiculous vision, or a hopeless romantic overcome by wishful thinking?

For that matter and while we're at it... Is it really too much to ask, that the King rule with righteousness, as Psalm 72 envisions? That the poor be treated justly and that everyone be able to prosper reasonably? Is it too much to ask that the powerful devote their resources to providing for the well-being of the powerless? That the King, or our leaders...or we... exist to serve and protect those least able to navigate the darkness and insecurity in this world? That we can help make hope and joy the energy that keeps us all alive, rather than fear and struggle?

Well, I don't think it is too much to ask. We've been asking for it for thousands of years. And God knows in our times that we still have to be asking. But is it just wishful thinking?

No. Not for those of us whose hope is in God.

Now, maybe it sounds like I am playing a game of semantics this morning: "wish," "hope"... what's the big difference? You know, I spent many a summer when I was a boy wishing I might catch a big bass from the lake by my house. But after a few fruitless casts of the lure most every day, I gave it up, wishing it might happen another day. I guess it never occurred to me that I might actually have to work to catch that fish, to be patient and determined and persevering. Wishing I might catch a

fish will get me down to the lake, but hoping I will catch a fish will keep me there until the work is done.

See, a wish expresses a desire, but on its own, a wish does nothing to make that desire attainable. A wish is fleeting. I even sort of know that my wishes will never come true. But hope... Hope expects that which it desires. It looks for it! Where a wish is something we want to happen to us, a hope is something we will work for. Hope is a confident and trusting expectation; it is built upon a promise, and it anticipates a real end. To hope for something is to share in the responsibility for its fulfillment. Hope gives us a place to stand, a way to live, and a vision of the future into which we can work. Isaiah doesn't wistfully pine away for a peaceful world; he proclaims that God is making the world peaceful. And our job is to help bring that to be. So, are we in or are we out?

I know it isn't easy, but I don't know why it should be. I've heard it said that ... "We all realize how fragile hope can be. Hope dances on the edge of wishing, comes close to expecting, and retreats [again] to wishing. We do not want to be disappointed, so we wish instead of hope."

But Advent is a season of hope. It is the time of Immanuel, God with us. In Advent it's time to stop wishing for the impossible, and to start living for the possibilities. Righteousness, justice for the poor, prosperity for the people. For the powerful to care for the powerless. For all to live together in peacefulness, without fear and without oppression. Upon these things we measure our hope. And it is within our power, each and every one of us, to act upon our hopes... by the way we care for each other, the compassion and fairness we demand of our leaders, the things we have that we share for the good of the world. Hope isn't blind; it perceives the challenges which faith in God can present. But hope can persevere while wishes fade like a coin tossed into a well that sinks to the murky bottom.

And hope reminds us that what has not been places no ultimate condition on what must be. A man once confronted the Mahatma Gandhi, claiming Gandhi's vision of a peaceful world was unrealistic. "You know nothing at all about history," the man said. "Never has a nation been able to free itself or live without violence."

But Gandhi replied: "*You* know nothing about history. The first thing you have to learn about history is that because something has not taken place in the past, that does not mean that it cannot take place in the future."

So hear again the words of the prophet...

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

*The spirit of the Lord is upon him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*

*And because of him, none will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.*

We know the one of whom the prophecy speaks. And we know the kind of world he is calling us to make. Our role is to help bring that large invisible but incredibly lively world into being, with God's help.

And I am looking for that world where, someday, I hope that deer shall wander through my back yard... unafraid.