

ADVENT 3 A: "If Wishes Were Promises"
DECEMBER 16, 2007
GLORY OF GOD LC, WHEAT RIDGE
TEXT: MATTHEW 11:2-11; PSALM 146; ISAIAH 35:1-10

What do you wish for?

If I could give you what you wish for, what would it be?

Do you have a list?

Or is there just one thing, one intangible thing money can't buy?

If you could get what you wish for,
what would your world look like?

If you knew you could count on me to keep my promises forever,
would you tell me?

If you knew I could move heaven and earth,
the seas, and all that is in them to do it,
do you think I would, for you?

**Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help,
whose hope is in the LORD their God;
who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them;
who keeps promises forever.**

Could you get what you want from God?

What would God be willing to promise you?

Would this be enough:

**The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers
are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the
poor have good news brought to them.**

What more could you wish for?

This is the season of wish fulfillment;
 this is the season of unfulfilled expectations.

**The LORD gives justice to those who are oppressed,
 and food to those who hunger....**

Is that enough, or should we wish for more?

Are you the one who is to come, Jesus, or are we to wish for more?

John the Baptist is disappointed; he didn't get everything he wished for.

He made a list, told us to get ready if we didn't want to burn—
**one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...
 every tree that does not bear good fruit
 is cut down and thrown into the fire!**

John wished for the day of the Lord, which for him meant judgment:

God **has come near...**(Matthew 3)

...with vengeance, with terrible recompense—
 that's what it's like when God **comes [to] save you.**
 (Isaiah 35)

But now he's not so sure.

He was sure Jesus was the one,
 the Lamb of God who would take away all the sin in the world,
 even in you and me.

But this isn't what he wished for; he didn't want *this*.

He didn't ask to be a **prophet**—God just made him one;
 he was born a prophet,
 but that doesn't mean it was what he wished for.

Suddenly it was just time, and he found himself in the wilderness;
 nowhere was the only place he felt at home.

Crowds came out to him,
 and he cursed their leaders and told them they were all sinners.

And the more he screamed repentance, the more they came,
 to be **baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins,**
 telling him their secret wishes, in front of God and everybody.

Because of the **fire**—
 he promised them **fire,**
 cleansing fire, burning all the way down,
 until nothing was left but their need of God.

Jesus would bring **fire** and judge their sorry souls,
 if not burn them to a crisp.

That's what he promised, because that's what a prophet does:
 a prophet promises judgment and the Day of the Lord,
 a prophet promises vengeance, burning, and cleansing.

A prophet stands up to kings and power,
 and won't pledge allegiance to anything.

A prophet challenges all your loyalties,
 and calls you to repent and get right with God.

A prophet steps into God's future, and tells us what to wish for.

A prophet tells you to prepare for God,
 and a prophet promises it will all be worth it,
 because, wish for what you will, you ain't seen nothing yet.

But this isn't what John the Baptist wished for; Jesus is a disappointment.

Jesus touches lepers and sick people,
 heals the blind and the lame,
 calls the poor his friends.

That's all very nice,
 but that's not judgment,
 that's not making them pay for their sins.

Miracle workers are a dime a dozen—but where's the **fire?**

So clear this up for me, Jesus:

Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?

I bet my life on you, Jesus!—everything I've got is riding on you.

Are you going to waste some kings and oppressors,
or was I just wasting my time out there in the wilderness?

I called those snakes out, and they threw me in prison for it,
and here I sit and rot, and what for?

Do you have some vengeance up your sleeve yet,
or have you spent your wad comforting the poor?

It's not that I'm against compassion, but I was wishing for more.

I'm tired, Jesus:

I'm tired of people more powerful than me,
politicians and world leaders,
teachers and pastors and churches and governments,
commercials and billboards and advertisements,
the rich and the needy, too,
parents and children, too—
telling me what to do, what they wish I'd be,
their unfulfilled expectations.

I'm tired of war, and a world that has never known a moment's peace.

I'm tired of those who take pleasure in terror,
and say it's okay, because they're doing it for you.

I'm tired of people blowing themselves up, and I don't understand why.

I'm tired of desperate children
who carry guns into churches and schools,
and think there is respect to be gained in fear.

Where did they learn that, Lord? Was it me? Was it us?

I'm tired of genocide,
tired of hearing that there's nothing we can do about it,
or at least, nothing we're willing to do about it...
and I wish I cared enough to do something.

If Jesus had started quoting just one sentence earlier,
it would have been everything John wished for—listen:

Here is your God.

He will come with vengeance,

with terrible recompense.

He will come and save you.

Now that sounds like a God who is out to change things,
ready to stir things up and make a difference
and knock down anyone who stands in his way,
a strong God, loud and proud,
and strong enough to destroy what you call evil;
just what this society needs.

Maybe.

But not the kind of God you **hear and see** in Jesus.

You won't find Jesus in the halls of power
where the mighty flex their muscles under soft, expensive robes
and make their connections with one another.

He is kneeling instead beside the least of these,
binding up the tired ones,
the weak hands...the feeble knees...the fearful hearts.

He does not destroy evil, he heals it.

Here is your God...he will come and save you,
but not the way you'd expect.

He will save you from your enemies,
but he will not call them *his* enemies;
he will call them his friends.

All the things we call evil in the world,
the madness and violence,
even the young men with guns who shoot up churches and malls—
he will not call them evil; he will not give them that.

He will call them lost sheep and be their shepherd;
 he will call them broken and be their healer,
 he will call them sinner and redeem them—
 just as he has seen us for what we are,
 and redeemed us.

God comes, and maybe God is angry,
 but odds are, God is not angry like we are angry,
 or even angry about what we are angry.

Maybe God will destroy the things you and I call evil,
 or maybe God will love them and heal them instead.

Maybe God's judgment isn't hasty,
 maybe God doesn't think vengeance is like that at all.

Maybe it's just righteous,
 righteousness pure and hot, healing heat,
 righteousness making all things right again.

**The blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
 the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear,
 the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.**

That's the whole message,
 that's who Jesus was,
 his own description of what he means to you.

He is your healer from every weakness, every fear;
 every sorrow, every secret you cannot tell,
 your healer even from death.

Healing is his message, and ours:
 "that humanity is imperfect,
 that it needs to be healed,
 and all that Jesus did during his life
 and especially as a result of his death
 and rising from the dead
 was aimed toward healing what is wrong."
 (introduction to the service for healing)

The healing Jesus offers is about more than getting your life back,
 getting your life back the way you wish for,
 the way it was before.

Healing is more about bringing our lives back to God,
 where all wholeness resides,
 and living there.

Maybe that's not the God you wished for,
 but maybe it is the God you need—
 God beyond wishes,
 God beyond expectations,
 God beyond all we ever hoped for.

That's the way it is with God:
 you bet your life like a prophet
 on the God you wish for,
 then you let go of your expectations
 and wait to see the God you get.

You never can get the God you wish for;
 you only ever get the God who is, and was, and ever shall be.

But you do get the God you were made for,
 the God who promises to be your God,
 and keeps his promises
 forever.

Season of wishes—God of promises: Do not wait for another.

And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.

Amen.