

If you listen to it closely, Scripture is like a pair of hands reaching down to steady our steps. That's how Paul's words in Romans strike me this week — two prayers offered in a season when the world feels anything but quiet.

“May the God of steadfastness & encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another...” — & again: “May the God of hope fill you with all joy & peace in believing...”

Paul does not invoke some mystery god — he calls on *our* God — the God of encouragement. The God of *sticking to it*. The God of Harmony, of Hope, of Joy, of Peace.

Paul is trying to gather these early Christians together in God's love. He knows how fragile our harmony can be, how easily hope leaves us when life is hard, & how much we need God to fill the gaps we only drain by ourselves.

Paul's prayers prepare us for our Gospel today, where Matthew gives us no soft edges but rather John the Baptist — a man who appears to have been nursed in the wilderness, with sand in his hair, a bit of honeycomb stuck in his beard, & his voice sharpened not by anger but by urgency. If life is a highway, John's is a voice that knows how quickly people fall asleep behind the wheel of their own lives: “*Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.*”

John is not Paul praying gently over us. He arrives like a surprise knock at the door, *showing up to make us feel a bit uncomfortable*. And yet, Paul's prayers help us to hear

John's proclamation without running away. For it's not fear & shame, but *hope, perseverance, encouragement, & harmony* — these are why the prophet speaks his untamed words. John isn't trying to terrify those who have strayed: he's trying to wake us up.

Picture this: crowds coming out from the towns & cities — people like us, carrying their troubles on their backs. They come with marriages on the rocks, with griefs that still sting, with questions about work & family & God that they've never dared speak aloud. They come because somehow, even through the roughness of his voice, *something in John's voice cuts to their hearts*.

It's the wilderness that gives John that authority. In the wilderness, all our illusions blow away. The howling wind lays bare what we've been overlooking.

And John, in his camel-hair coat, stands there like one of those photographs where the lighting is brutally honest, no matter which way we stand. "Repent," he says — not to insult us but to invite us to put down whatever burdens keep us from walking *with God, towards God*.

Nobody especially likes to hear about axes at the root of trees or unquenchable fires. But Matthew isn't asking us to picture a God who delights in destruction. He's asking us to imagine the divine gardener—one who clears away what is dead so the living can grow unchoked.

There are habits we cling to like branches waiting to snap. There are fears that wrap around us like invasive vines. There are angers we water daily without ever noticing they

are out of control. We long for a God who will do what we cannot do for ourselves: cutting away what harms us, to make space for something beautiful to grow. John's words are strong in the way a surgeon's hands are strong — strong in the service of healing.

So here we are on the Second Sunday of Advent. One candle lit last week; another today. One flame is hope. The second is peace. These are just small flames — flickering in the draft of the sanctuary — easily blown out when left untended. These represent the very flames which Paul prays will consume our whole lives:

“May the God of hope fill you with all joy & peace in believing...”

Paul prays that harmony will take root in us — not as a thing of our own making, but as a gift God plants inside us. A gift that we are entrusted to tend. It is this *harmony* that John the Baptist is trying to make possible. He wants to clear away what keeps us from each other, what keeps us from God, what keeps us from the people we were created to be.

As John calls us to repentance, Paul tells us what we repent for: so that “with one voice” we may “glorify God.”

Notice that Paul says we glorify God “with one voice.” We don't all sing the same notes, but we sing as one people, creating harmonies together that are only possible when our hearts are set on God. Let us sing our hearts out in that key always.

And that's really what Advent is all about. It's not about feeling guilty but about *making room*... in our lives, in our attention, in our hearts. Making room in places that have grown crowded with fear, anxiety, or resentment. It is assuredly *not* about surrounding ourselves in comforts.

In Advent, we are each called to the wilderness — not to an actual wilderness, but to clear space in our lives to do what matters most. This we can do safely in the privacy of your own homes.

Maybe this week the wilderness will nudge us to put down the argument we've been rehearsing in our heads.
Or to make a phone call we've been avoiding.
Or to choose forgiveness over defensiveness, generosity over self-protection, hope over cynicism.

Because even now, even here, Christ is coming—quietly, steadily, like dawn stretching across the horizon.

And when he arrives, we want to be able to recognize him.

So we pray with Paul: “May the God of steadfastness & encouragement grant us to live in harmony.” And, “may the God of hope fill us with all joy & peace in believing.”

And we pray with John: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Make his paths straight.” Amen.