**2 Advent, Dec. 8, 2013, Is 11:1-10; Ps 72; Rom 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12; Rev Mary Trainor**

St. Paul said in today's Epistle, "***The*** ***root of Jesse shall come...in Him the Gentiles shall hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.***"

If you have traveled in a big city with a subway system, you would have seen signs that say "Mind the gap." "**Mind the gap**" is a warning phrase issued to passengers to take caution while crossing the gap between the [train](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Train) door and the [station platform](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Railway_platform). You can get hurt if you don't mind this gap! We can hurt ourselves if we don't mind another kind of gap: the gap between what's going on inside of us and what people see on the outside. Today, our Scripture lessons teach us about how to narrow this other kind of gap. The width of this gap reflects decisions we make every day: the gap is wide if there are big inconsistencies. For example: on the inside we know how important it is to exercise, but oh my - how often do we actually go to exercise?; on the inside we value loving our neighbor as ourselves, but actually caring for our neighbor is a whole different thing; on the inside we may be lonely, but on the outside we pretend we are just fine. And so on. The wider the gap, the less authentic we are. At Christmas-time this gap can be particularly wide; we don't want to show our stress on the outside. What would people think if they knew?

Just think about Christmas cards. Have you ever seen a family Christmas photo **not** full of smiles and cheer? No. Yet, don’t we all know that family life is full of challenges, pain, frustration, unhappiness, struggle, tension -- as well as joy? Personal example: about twenty five years ago, my family of five planned a photo session in our living room to take the Christmas Card photo—our three kids were adorable, and all dressed up in their Sunday best. Jim had the camera on a tripod, and had it set up so he could click the shutter and then run around and be in the photo. We took many photos, hoping to get a picture where all of us had good expressions on our faces. We got the photos back, ready to pick the best and in every one would you believe one of our kids was frowning. We had to pick one for the Christmas card, and we did! Preserved to this day is that very authentic family photo with that frown. Today, we are all able to laugh about the that day, but it was serious then -- this child was going through a tough time! There was no gap here between the outside and the inside.

The stress we experience when we hide what is going on inside of us takes a toll -- it can lead to addiction, cheating, abuse, and so on. Just look at those who are supposed to be our role models: from politicians, actors, and pop stars we are surrounded by people who don't live authentic lives, and exhibit these negative behaviors! Jesus wants to help us close the gap, to live with our inside selves matching our outside selves, following Him! If we do, we will, as Paul says, "***abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit."***

John the Baptist knew about this hope in Christ, and wanted us to know too. In today's Gospel, he tells us to prepare for the Lord: “***repent for the kingdom of heaven*** *(Jesus)* ***has come near***.” The word “***repent***” means to “**change one’s ways:**” to turn away from things that take us away from God. Repentance is about God's desire to realign us with Christ, to close the gap, and God has the power to do this if we let Him. The world tells us "*you can do it on your own"* but the Lord tells us to **lean on Him**, to get our strength from Him. There are two things in particular that we learn in this whole season of Advent: we learn that we are cherished by God for who we are and we are responsible for what we do. God cares and expects something of us; He expects us to "***bear good fruit***" in His name (Matt 7:17). The ability to do this is given to us from Jesus, the "***root of Jesse***."

"***Root of Jesse***" and the "***stump of Jesse***" are the strange names for Jesus in our readings today. We can get to know Jesus better from learning about these names. Picture a tree stump and a young shoot emerging from it. The stump appears dead, but is alive because of its root; it sends up new life. This new life that emerges, from the line of David (whose father's name was Jesse) that had been thought to be dead, is Jesus. God made the promise to King David to have this lineage last forever. But during the 600 years after David, this lineage of kings got into more and more trouble and it seemed like all hope was lost - then Jesus, the King of Kings, was born. Isaiah prophesied the coming of Jesus the Messiah saying, “***A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge***.” Paul quoted Isaiah in the Epistle saying, "***The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."*** Jesus is our hope.

We have a wonderful visual tool to use as a reminder of God's faithfulness with the "**Jesse Tree**." For centuries "Jesse trees" have been made in Advent. A Jesse tree is a tree with special ornaments that tell the salvation story, the faithfulness of God across 4,000 years of history. The tree is Jesus the branch, the shoot, the revelation of the grace of God. On the tree are hung 24 ornaments, and I have made a copy for you of those ornaments. You can find them in your pews. The ornaments begin with the Creation story in Genesis and end with the Gospels. They each have a drawing of a bible story and a passage of Scripture. Take them home, color and cut them out, put them on your tree between now and Christmas -- look up and read the Scripture verses. As you make your own Jesse tree, you will be reminded of the continuity of God's love, patience, and hope.

During Advent, examine yourself to see how big the gap is between what is going on inside of you and what other people see. Jesus, the root of Jesse, is waiting to love you and waiting for you to lean on Him for strength. Don't try to get through it all on your own. If you let Jesus in and repent, that gap will narrow, and you will overflow with hope and "***bear much fruit***." As St. Paul said, "***The*** ***root of Jesse shall come...in Him the Gentiles shall hope. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.***" Amen.