

*Advent 2, The House of Bread...Waiting: kneading*  
*Isaiah 11.1-10; Matthew 3.1-12*

Every year, every second Sunday of Advent, we hear from John the Baptist. Every year we hear his call to “Repent.... Bear fruit worthy of repentance.... Prepare the way of the Lord.” Every year. And in two out of three years we hear the threat that unproductive trees will be chopped down.

These are the words of Scripture that are given to us in the season of Advent. Year after year these words repeat. Year after year, we live them again and repeat the process. Year after year, we wait and repent and prepare. “Repent.... Bear fruit worthy of repentance.... Prepare the way of the Lord.”

And every year, Advent begins with the end. Again this week, we hear and see the end in the voices of Isaiah and John the Baptist. John imagines a turning—a repentance that will completely turn and transform our knowing, our seeing, our hearing, our very being; a repentance that will bear fruit and prepare the way of the Lord; a repentance that ushers in the Kingdom of G-D.

The end that Isaiah imagines is just as compelling—earth, creation, and creatures in peace with each other.

But at the edges of each of these end-times scenes is violence and destruction and devastation. Or at least the threat of violence. In Isaiah, in verses preceding today’s reading we hear, “Look, the Sovereign, YHWH of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. YHWH will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.” From the tallest and mightiest trees to the thickets and shrubs, G-D is cutting it down. All of it. And

into this wilderness of destruction and death we hear the unexpected news that, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and an offshoot shall bear fruit out of his roots.”

There is life! With YHWH, the Living G-D, there is always life! Life *always* follows the destruction of that which is no longer life-giving. The breath of the Living G-D is always blowing, breathing new life in barren and fruitless places, breathing resurrection where there was death. In Isaiah, what were once ancient and weary trees and forests are now wilderness and wasteland. And the Spirit of G-D is blowing, always breathing Life.

It's the same process with bread dough. The breadmaker makes the dough by mixing the leavening with water and flour and salt. She adds flour, at first stirring it into the dough. But when the dough is too stiff she puts aside the spoon and uses her hands, pressing and incorporating the flour into the dough, kneading the dough, pushing it, pulling, folding. She keeps adding flour, keeps kneading, pressing, pushing, folding the dough, again and again, working it, hard, until the gluten is released and the dough is elastic, ready to rest, ready to rise. Then she covers the dough—this dough that has been vigorously and relentlessly punched and beaten, kneaded and folded—and puts it in a dark, cool place. The cooler and darker the place, the slower the rise, the better the taste and texture of the end. And after hours of rising, when the dough is full of life, full of air, fat and round, the breadbaker dusts her hands with flour, curls her hands into fists, and sinks them deep into the dough. Once again kneading, pushing, pressing, folding. Kneading until all the air, all the breath has been punched out of the dough.

John the Baptist is calling us to this process of kneading, of *being* kneaded. We aren't the Breadbaker, G-D is. Being kneaded by the Holy Baker will result in the repentance—the turning and transformation that John is preaching. In Isaiah's vision, we see the end product

of repentance, of a people having been kneaded. John sees Isaiah's vision and he's urgent in his call to make the end a reality in the present, on earth as in heaven.

We tend to think of repentance as confession: that we *repent* by naming our sins and saying we're sorry. And that we intend to do better next time. That's certainly part of repentance. But John's call every year, year after year, is so much more than an admission of wrongdoing and sin. The urgent repentance that John keeps pointing us to takes a lot longer and is much harder than a simple confession. Repentance is about turning and transformation; it's about being changed from the inside out. It's about having our seeing and our hearing, our understanding—and our *being* itself—turned around. Repentance is being *kneaded* by life, kneaded by the hands of G-D, our heavenly Breadbaker. We can be sure that we're in full repentance when everything we thought we knew and understood is being pushed and pulled and folded upside down and inside out...and discovering in the midst of it all...a new, G-D-given capacity to love. Repentance is being punched and squeezed by life...and noticing that everywhere you look, there is beauty. Repentance is being in cold, dark places...and feeling the warmth of G-D's Spirit rising up within you.

This is the process of being kneaded. Kneading isn't punishment. In life, we will be punched down...punched so hard and so persistently that we lose our breath. An instinctive response to being beaten and pressed by hard things is to see ourselves as victims—victims of others, victims of life. Being punched down by circumstances can make us afraid—afraid to trust, afraid to love, afraid to laugh. Experiencing the pain and suffocation of life poking and prodding us can make us want to numb our pain or hide.

But in Isaiah's vision and in John's call, we hear the possibility of experiencing our lives...not as victims and not as punishment...but as invitation to live as G-D is imagining life. Our lives and life on earth.

In Isaiah, the mighty and towering trees are cut down. And out of their stumps, a new shoot emerges. New, green growth that G-D has brought to life. What has been felled is the illusion that I am powerful and mighty, that in order for me to survive I need to tower above everyone else. In that kind of living I'm so preoccupied with my individual life that I don't have eyes to see all the life around me.

But G-D see *all* life, and *all* life matters—the lowly and vulnerable *and* the mighty and powerful. In G-D's imagination, all bodies, all life is infinitely precious and eternally loved. There is no tree, no body, no life unworthy of G-D's gratuitous love. And trees that are growing in G-D's love *will* produce fruit, abundant and nourishing fruit. And dough that is leavened by the Spirit of G-D and being kneaded by the Hands of G-D *will* produce nourishing, satisfying bread.

Repentance is hard. But when we give ourselves to G-D's hands for felling and kneading, we find ourselves alive in new ways. Rather than a self-centered preoccupation with life, we begin to see an exquisite beauty and aliveness that *we are part of*. We now see and know and experience ourselves as part of the cosmic dough of life! We *are* producing fruit worthy of repentance! Not only are we productive, but in the Hands of our Breakmaker we are also *being* bread. In our repentance...*we are feeding* life, being consumed by life—not in a predatory way—but in a peaceable, generous, and life-sustaining way.

In Isaiah's vision, predator and prey live side by side, at peace. When we live as wolves, out of our own might and power, that vision is impossible. But when we have been kneaded by G-D's hands, it's not only possible, but it's likely! In G-D's Peaceable Kingdom, predators no longer have to assert their might and dominance. They know their hunger will be satisfied. And lambs? Those who were victims, living in fear and trying to protect themselves, they discover their G-D-given power and strength. Living in repentance,

kneaded by G-D, we are being breathed into life, true life, by the Spirit of G-D. And we find ourselves thriving in the Kindom of G-D, a Kindom teeming with life and aliveness. A Kindom where lambs and wolves live side-by-side, no longer predator, no longer prey.

So we end...at the beginning. We can now hear John's cry, "Repent!" not as warning but as invitation—a call to life, abundant life, eternal life! And we welcome this call to repent. Another year has passed and there is more turning, more felling, more kneading to be done to prepare the Way. So we offer ourselves, once again, as individuals and as a community, to our Breadmaker's kneading, trusting that this hard and painful process of being turned over and over, inside out and upside down is not for destruction, but for transformation of life. For transformation into life! Each year more of our fear is kneaded and released, preparing the way for new life to be breathed into us, for life to rise. Each year more old growth of domination and supremacy is cut down so that new shoots can sprout into life.

And each year, after another year of being kneaded, our eyes *see* more and more of the peaceable Kindom. G-D's Spirit *is* breathing. G-D's Hands *are* kneading. It is slow, undramatic, sure. New life is rising up in lowly places, hidden places, forgotten places. Yes, there is oppression and injustice and our eyes must see it and we must act. And while we see it, we must also see all the ways and places where the wolf and the lamb are already living in peace.

The dough in G-D's Hands is beautiful, textured, elastic, rich, nourishing. May we have eyes to see it! May we give ourselves, individually and as a Fellowship of Hope, may we give ourselves to being kneaded, to becoming the feast the Breadbaker is preparing!