Today's readings speak to people who are running low on hope. In Matthew, even John the Baptist—bold prophet and forerunner—wonders if Jesus is truly the One. And in Isaiah, God meets a weary community with a promise: "I am about to do a new thing… do you not perceive it?" Together, these scriptures remind us that when our faith feels thin and our path unclear, God is still at work—opening rivers in dry places and renewing hope right where we are.

Our Witness of Ancient Wisdom is from Matthew 11:1-11

1 Now when Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from
there to teach and proclaim his message in their cities.
2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his
disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for
another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the
blind receive their sight, the lame walk, those with a skin disease are cleansed,
the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to
them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."
7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did
you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What,
then, did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who
wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What, then, did you go out to see? A
prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom
it is written,
'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.'
11 "Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than
John the Baptist, yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

9

Isaiah 43:19-23, NRSVUE
19
I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth; do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.
20
The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches,
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,
21

the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.
Witness of Modern Wisdom
“God in the Kitchen” by Rev. Sarah (Are) Speed
I called home my first semester of college. I told my mom I was fine,
but I was homesick. She must have heard the truth in my voice.
The ache ate at me. It was a long, slow song, a million tiny ants
slurping the juice from a peach. I was tender and bruised,
in the doldrums of it all. But she could hear all of that. So three states away,
she preheated the oven. Three states away,
she tossed blueberries in a thin layer of flour. Three states away,
she dusted a layer of streusel over the soft peaks
of a dozen warm muffins. And three days later,
I unboxed a package from home—
a dozen blueberry muffins, a love letter with my name on it,
a reminder that I was not alone.
If you’re running out of hope, count to three.
God is in the kitchen. She’s just waiting for yeast to rise.

God is still speaking, and we are still listening. Thanks be to God!

Will you pray with me?
Merciful God,
we need bread, and we need laughter.
We need music, and we need a hand to hold.
We need a chair to sit in, and we need work to do.
But maybe more than anything,
we need your living Word, and a reason to hope.
So move through this space today
and speak to us as only you can.
Speak a word of hope deep into our weary bones.
For we need bread and we need laughter,

but most of all, we need you. Amen.

This week we continue our Advent series, Insisting on Hope, as we light the candle of peace. And if we’re honest, peace can feel especially fragile this time of year.
At school, our kids are counting down: ten more school days until Winter Break.
At home, many of us are counting down, too, with projects to finish, traditions to maintain, things to worry about, and far too much to do.
Christmastime can be wonderful and filled with joy, but it can also feel …
overwhelming. Can I get an amen?

During the Time with the Young People, I talked about the ducks at the library pond. I love watching them glide across the water—calm, peaceful, serene. But underneath? Those little feet are paddling like crazy.
And that's how many of us move through Advent: trying so hard to appear peaceful … while our hearts and minds … churn, just beneath the surface…
And that brings us to this week's scripture.
Advent traditionally gives us at least one Sunday with John the Baptist crying out from the wilderness, preparing the way for the Lord.
But in this text, we meet John at the end of his ministry—not bold and fiery, but silenced, imprisoned, his future narrowed… to a dimly lit cell.

It is still "the Time of King Herod." Though this Herod is a different one than in last week's reading - Instead of Herod the Great, it is his son, Herod Antipas.
Different Herod, same oppressive lineage.
As Obery Hendricks writes, Herod's sons inherited "a legacy of ruthlessness and brutality," a regime that reached into every corner of Jewish life.
For his criticism of the regime, John is now held, under that authority, awaiting his execution.
And from that place of fear and confinement, John sends a question to Jesus:

"Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?"
This is not the voice we expect from John.
This is not the "prepare ye the way!" prophet.
This is a man wondering if his life… made any difference.
And, you know what? That is a question that echoes across centuries.
After every protest where nothing seems to change…
After every vigil for peace that ends with more violence…
After every prayer that goes unanswered…
After every effort to do good that feels so incredibly small…compared to the need.
We often ask:
Did any of it matter?
Did I get it wrong?
Is hope naïve?
Even the strongest among us—people who've dedicated their lives to justice, care, faith, organizing—have moments when our hope grows thin.
Jesus' Response: Look Again
What amazes me is that, upon receiving this message, Jesus does not scold John.
He doesn't say:
"John! You of all people should know better."
Or: "Why are you doubting?"
Or: "Where is your faith?"
Instead, he tells him to look again at what has been happening:
"Go and tell John what you see and hear:

the blind see,
the lame walk,
lepers are cleansed,
the deaf hear,
the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them."

He gives John… evidence, though, perhaps not the kind John hoped for or expected.
Jesus does NOT say, "The empire is toppled."
Nor does he say, "Herod is gone."
Nor does he promise John's release…
Instead, he invites John to look again, and perceive God at work in small, quiet signs of transformation—signs the prophet once described…the very signs that point to God's new world breaking through.
There is more than one way those held captive find release…
And maybe that's where peace begins—not in the absence of conflict, not in certainty or success, but in perceiving the slow, often hidden work of God in places we might overlook.

This week of Advent is about cultivating a gritty kind of hope—a hope not easily diminished by fear or disappointment.
A hope that makes peace with waiting.
A hope that doesn't require guaranteed outcomes.
A hope that trembles, as Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee puts it, but is still hope.
Because we know—deep down—that the world is full of people whose prophetic witness lands them in prison.
Not just spiritually imprisoned, but literally.
Not just in ancient times, but still today!
And so we ask: How do we keep their hope alive?
How do we continue the work they began?
How do we insist on peace when the world around us is anything but peaceful?

This past Monday we sent out an update about Ghassan Abusa-wawin.
For several years now, our church has been praying with and for Ghassan, a Palestinian refugee who has lived in limbo—year after year—waiting for a safe place to call home.
And now, finally, he is so close to being resettled in Canada. He has a sponsor.
Passed background checks, and health checks…
So close. But still… not yet.
And every step of the way, it has taken effort to keep hope alive—for him and with him. Because at each stage, there has been uncertainty, delay, bureaucracy, and fear that something would fall apart.
But we continue to pray. We continue to advocate.

We continue to hope—not because the outcome is guaranteed, but because insisting on hope is part of faithfulness.
As MaryAnn McKibben Dana says,
“Hope isn’t what we think.
Hope isn’t what we feel.
Hope isn’t even what we imagine is possible.
Hope is what we do in the face of suffering, pain, and injustice.”
Hope is action. Hope is solidarity. Hope is choosing to believe God is at work even when outcomes remain unknown.
The Peace Jesus Points Toward
The peace Jesus offers John, is not peace through victory.
Not peace through control and domination.
Not peace through the removal and neutralization of all threats.
It is peace through perception—through seeing the world through new eyes, through God’s eyes, through Love’s eyes.
Jesus basically says:
“John, look again.
The empire is still standing.

Herod still reigns.
Your cell is still locked.
AND … God’s dream for the world is already unfolding.”
And that is true for us, too.
We pray for peace in Gaza, Ukraine, Sudan—and war rages on.
We pray for healing—and illness continues.
We pray for justice—and injustice persists.
We pray for deliverance—and freedom remains elusive.
But that does not mean God is absent or inactive.
It only means that the story is still being written.

Jesus affirms John, not in spite of his question, but through it. He says:
“Among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John.”
In this way, Jesus names John’s trembling hope as part of his faithfulness.
Friends, Advent does not ask us to manufacture hope we do not feel.
It does not ask us to pretend everything is okay.
It does not ask us to suppress our fears or doubts.
Rather, Advent invites us to bring our thin hope—our fragile, flickering, trembling hope—straight to Jesus.
And it invites us to listen again:
What do we see?
What do we hear?
Where is God at work, even now?
Where We See God at Work Today

If we look closely, peace is being born in quiet places:
Children being fed.
Families being sheltered.
Neighbors supporting neighbors.

Volunteers showing up again and again.
People advocating for justice even when they feel tired.
And people like, Ghassan, holding onto hope, for one more day.
Our own church, continuing to be a place of welcome, healing, hospitality, and courage.
And maybe that is the peace Jesus invites us into:
Not the peace of having everything resolved,
but the peace of knowing God is still at work.
God is at work beneath the surface —like those duck feet paddling underwater—moving even when the waters look calm, or choppy, or hopeless.
Insisting on Peace, Insisting on Hope
So today, as we light the candle of peace, we honor the truth that peace is not always a feeling.
Sometimes peace is a practice.
Sometimes peace is a choice.
Sometimes peace is the decision to hope when hope feels thin.
And maybe making peace with our unrealized hopes, as still-yet-to-be realized hopes, is one of the most faithful things we can do.
John did not get the ending he longed for.
Jesus did not overturn the empire in his lifetime.
And yet, their lives mattered profoundly.
Their hope changed the world.
And, I believe, so will ours.
Because when we are running out of hope—that may be the perfect moment to ask:
What do you see?
What do you hear?
Where, even now, is something new springing forth?
And then, with trembling hope, to answer:

God is at work.
Still.
Even here.
Even now. Amen.