

Advent 2 A 2010

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

A reading from the book of the Brothers Grimm.

Once upon a time  
Though not that long ago  
Or all that far away  
There lived in the great forest  
A poor woodcutter and his wife  
With their three daughters.

One day the woodcutter said to his wife,  
My dear,  
I am afraid that today  
I must go far into the forest.  
Send our eldest daughter after me  
With my dinner.  
I will scatter millet on the ground  
To show her the way  
To where I am cutting.

When the dinner was ready,  
The mother sent the eldest daughter  
Into the forest to find her father.  
But – can you imagine? –  
The birds had eaten all the millet,  
And so the daughter lost her way,  
And wandered frightened in the forest  
Until at last, just as darkness fell  
The poor girl saw a light through the trees,  
And made her way to a little cottage,  
Poor and rough and dirty.

She dreaded to knock at the door,

But what could she do?  
Dark night was all around her,  
And a wolf howled.  
She knocked.

Come in! a voice said at once.  
The girl went in,  
And saw a fire burning brightly,  
And arranged before it,  
A cock, a hen, and a brindled cow.  
And seated at the table,  
An old and grizzled man,  
With matted hair and beard  
Trailing down and covering his hands  
Resting on the table.

May I take shelter here?  
Asked the girl.  
And have you anything to eat?

What do you think?  
The old man asked the cock,  
The hen, and the brindled cow.  
They gave their assent.

There is food in the larder,  
Make us some supper,  
Said the old man.  
So the girl prepared a supper from the food she found,  
And they sat and ate,  
While the cock, the hen,  
And the brindled cow looked on.

There is a bed upstairs,  
Said the old man,  
Go and sleep.

And so she did.

But in the night she heard the voices  
Of the animals calling,  
Of us you have not thought,  
Sleep now as you ought,  
And before she knew it,  
She had fallen straight through the floor  
And into the cellar,  
Where she lay trapped.

Her parents worried  
when she did not come home that night,  
But still the next morning,  
The father said,  
Send our second daughter with my dinner.  
Today I will scatter lentils,  
They will be easier to see.

But of course,  
when the second daughter set out through the forest,  
the birds had eaten all the lentils,  
And everything was just as before,  
And the second daughter ended up in the cellar  
With her sister.

Must I send my dearest child away as well?  
The mother pleaded the next morning.  
Today I will scatter peas, said the father.  
And she is a sensible girl,  
She will not get lost.

But when night fell,  
The youngest daughter was knocking  
At the cottage door.

May I take shelter here?  
She asked the old man.  
And have you any food to share?

There is food in the larder,  
Make us a supper.  
So the girl prepared a supper from the food she found,  
And laid it before the old man.

Then she looked at the cock, the hen,  
And the brindled cow.  
Shall I sit and eat while you look on  
And have no supper?  
She asked them.

She went back to the larder,  
Took grain and hay,  
And a dish of water,  
And fed the animals  
Before she sat down to share supper with the old man.

At bed time,  
She shook out the bedding for the animals,  
And then went up the stairs  
And lay down on her bed.

In the middle of the night,  
A clap of thunder,  
A flash of lightening,  
The little cottage shook  
As if it would tumble to the ground.

But when the morning came,  
the girl was unhurt.  
She got up from her bed  
And went to look for the animals,  
But found instead three servants,  
And coming after them,  
A king with a golden crown.

Welcome to my palace, he said,  
And indeed when she looked around

She saw that the cottage  
Was a beautiful palace.

You have set us free, the king said.  
I welcomed many travelers to my poor cottage,  
But until someone came  
Who thought to feed and care for my servants before herself  
We were trapped,  
I as an old man,  
They as animals.  
You have freed us.  
Come, my bride,  
Come into your palace.  
So she took the king's hand,  
And walked through the cottage door  
Into the palace,  
And the kingdom was hers.

The kingdom of heaven  
Is at hand.  
In fact, it's right here,  
Hidden in plain view  
Everywhere all around us,  
If only we could turn around and see it.

Turn around and have a second look,  
repent,  
because there's something new here  
something new and uncomfortable and scary  
and maybe wonderful  
that will change everything.  
That's what the Baptist tells us,  
If only we can hear him.

But it isn't easy.

It isn't easy to hear the harsh,  
Unruly prophet

With his smelly clothes and peculiar food,  
And his troubling message.  
He's so unlike us, after all.

But that's the secret of the kingdom,  
That it could be hidden anywhere,  
Even in the voice  
Of the dirty and outlandish prophet  
Who turns away decent people –  
Decent people like the Pharisees  
Who only want to do the right thing.

Don't presume,  
John the Baptist tells them,  
Don't presume upon your heritage  
Or your cleverness  
Or even your piety.

Everything is up for grabs now;  
Only one thing counts:  
Turning around and uncovering the kingdom.

Can we hear his message now?  
Are we ready to be shaken loose  
From everything we hold on to  
So that our hands are free  
To embrace the kingdom?

It's nearby, in fact it's right under your nose:  
The dirty cottage contains a palace.  
The animals  
Are your brothers and sisters.  
The gruff old man  
Is the king of glory.  
And he loves you.

You can take his hand  
And walk through the cottage door

Into the kingdom,  
If you're ready for what you'll find there.

A wolf lying down with a lamb.  
That's the image of the kingdom  
The prophet gives us.  
The calf and the lion,  
With a little child between them.

When I was a child,  
Those wonderful early American paintings  
Of the peaceable kingdom  
really were for me  
An image of peace.

Think about  
The lion.  
When you see that expression –  
That self-satisfied,  
Maybe slightly goofy expression,  
You know the world has changed  
And the kingdom has come.

And I guess for a long time  
I trusted that the kingdom would be like that.  
That hidden under the lion's fierceness  
Was a friend.  
That it would be easy  
To welcome such a lion  
To my picnic in the peaceable kingdom.

But now I wonder.  
The lion is still a lion.  
When Paul called the Christians in Rome,  
Who were trying to build a community  
Made up of people from very different traditions,  
When Paul called them  
To welcome one another

As Christ had welcomed them,  
He was calling them  
To a radical act,  
To a complete overthrow of everything they stood for  
And believed was right.

Sit down with those people?  
Right here and now?  
Just as they are?  
Surely we can ask  
At least a few simple things of them first?  
Can't we ask the lion to pull his teeth  
Before he sits down with our lambs?

But that's the secret of the kingdom,  
Isn't it?  
That it's waiting to unfold  
In our midst,  
While we are still our messy selves.

It's living in the kingdom that transforms us,  
Not our transformation that ushers in the kingdom.

The only thing we need to do, now,  
Is turn around and see the kingdom here and now.

When we recognize our kinship  
With the hen and the brindled cow,  
Then we recognize the palace  
Waiting inside the hut.

Who's waiting to welcome us  
Into a hut that holds a palace?  
Who's waiting for our welcome?

Who doesn't look like us,  
Sound like us,  
Smell like us,

Or eat our food?  
Who's out there, dressed in a camel skin  
And eating bugs?  
Who's out there,  
Interpreting scripture in a different way,  
Or watching the news on a different channel  
Or telling us everything we do is wrong?  
Who slept on our steps last night?

God has welcomed each of us,  
In all our ludicrous variety.  
And so we might welcome each other.

When we're ready  
To welcome each other,  
Wolves and lambs  
And lions and children  
Then we will be ready,  
Once again  
At last  
To welcome the little guest  
Who is our host  
Hidden in the dirty cottage  
With the cock, the hen,  
And the brindled cow.

Already the kingdom of heaven  
Is hidden all around us,  
Waiting to be unwrapped  
And opened up and enjoyed.  
Right now.