Advent Devotional December 17, 2026

Scripture

2 Peter 2:10-16

Bold and willful, they are not afraid to slander the glorious ones, [11] whereas angels, though greater in might and power, do not bring against them a slanderous judgment. [12] These people, however, are like irrational animals, mere creatures of instinct, born to be caught and killed. They slander what they do not understand, and as those creatures are destroyed, they also will be destroyed, [13] suffering the wages of doing wrong. They count it a pleasure to revel in the daytime. They are blots and blemishes, reveling in their pleasures while they feast with you. [14] They have eyes full of adultery, insatiable for sin. They entice unsteady souls. They have hearts trained in greed. Accursed children! [15] They have left the straight road and have gone astray, following the road of Balaam son of Bosor, who loved the wages of doing wrong [16] but was rebuked for his own transgression; a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice and restrained the prophet's madness.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, [2] "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." [3] This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord;
make his paths straight.' "

[4] Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. [5] Then Jerusalem and all Judea and all the region around the Jordan were going out to him, [6] and they were baptized by him in the River Jordan, confessing their sins.

[7] But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming for his baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? [8] Therefore, bear fruit worthy of repentance, [9] and do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor,' for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. [10] Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; therefore every tree that does not bear good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.

[11] "I baptize you with water for repentance, but the one who is coming after me is more powerful than I, and I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. [12] His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Devotion

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The first season of the Netflix show *Beef* (2023) tracks a descent of Danny Cho (played by Steven Yeun) and Amy Lau (played by Ali Wong) into a type of hell. What starts as a road rage incident spirals into intensifying waves of devastation. I don't want to spoil things, but businesses are ruined, people are killed, houses are burned. Both characters have multiple opportunities to dial things back, to set things right, to return to the land of the living. But they choose, again and again, to isolate themselves and sow destruction.

And yet, over the course of the season, Danny and Amy appear as sympathetic characters. They are not necessarily evil people intent on harm, but rather individuals caught up in social forces they cannot control or understand. It is not so much a descent into hell as it is a witness to the hellscape created by unbridled greed, racism, and weakened social bonds. They have no one to pull them back from the brink. The social connections they do have only curate an acquisitive desire for more—more money, more property, more victories. Danny and Amy are caught in a lie about who they are and what matters, and they cannot see a way out.

The second chapter of 2 Peter is almost as strange and unsettling as the show *Beef.* The author begins the chapter warning about false prophets and ends with the text for today, which calls for violence against those "accursed children" whose blasphemy and greed lead others astray. Given histories of religious violence, these texts rightly make us uncomfortable. And yet, it ends with the story of Balaam, a false prophet bent on destruction whose evil intent is thwarted by a donkey and redirected toward God's greater purposes. By "restraining the prophet's madness," God offers grace and a thread of hope in a world that seems destined for self-destruction.

John the Baptist appears in the midst of this kind of world—a world of false prophets and beset by greed and social dysfunction. And he announces not only God's restraint of evil but the healing of what is broken. "The kingdom of heaven has come near" (Matt 3:2). This is the remarkable thing we remember in Advent: the God who sends John and restrains Balaam is able to meet us, no matter the hellscape.

Prayer

Pray the opening verses from this morning's Psalm (Psalm 18:1-3):

I love you, O Lord, my strength.
The Lord is my rock, my fortress, and my deliverer,
my God, my rock in whom I take refuge,
my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold.
I call upon the Lord, who is worthy to be praised,
so I shall be saved from my enemies.