

Sprouting Life

2nd Sunday in Advent; Series A

Isaiah 11:1-10



A shoot coming forth from a stump (**show picture**). What a sign of hope! A stump is a sign of death and defeat. The life that once stood tall, perhaps even bearing great fruit is now felled to the floor. There is not much hope or expectation wrapped in the picture of a chopped down stump. Though, a sprig, a sprout, or a shoot, coming forth and growing from a stump, now that is a picture of hope. That is a picture of relentless resiliency. Life grows in the very place where death and decay seemed to have the definitive word. The picture on your bulletin cover and the image on the projector screen both capture this mood of hope, relentlessness, and life-filled expectation. They are both contemporary images of the very same image that the Prophet Isaiah paints in our mind's eye this morning through the reading of the Old Testament lesson.

For the purpose of our sermon this morning I would like to focus your attention to the image on the projector screen. Some of you may recognize this hope-filled stump. This is part of the stump of a massive rock rose bush that was chopped down during our work party here at Atonement on Saturday morning, November 2. This massive bush once stood on the west side of the front porch right outside the front doors. The bush that once stood tall is now reduced to a mere stump—chopped down!

So why the chopping? What is the purpose of chopping down this bush and reducing it to a stump? Well, for starters, it was a deceptive bush. Last week we remembered Jesus' triumphal entry into Jerusalem during the last week of his three year Ministry. Fitting with the Advent theme of our Lord's coming to us, we remembered his coming into Jerusalem to do what was necessary for our salvation. Jesus entered Jerusalem during the time of the annual Passover Festival when the city was very crowded. So he and his disciples stayed in a "bedroom community" called Bethany and traveled to and from Jerusalem each day. As the Evangelist Matthew records it, on one of those trips into Jerusalem, Jesus went to satisfy his hunger by taking fruit from a nearby fig tree. Yet, this mature fig tree was deceiving. It had leaves but no fruit. And so to make a point Jesus "chopped" it down with his authoritative Word (Mt 21:18-19). And so many of you know that this bush gave the appearance of life and health on the outside, yet underneath the green outer layer were dead branches. They were even preventing the bush from being as healthy and lively as it had the potential to be. As is often the case in gardening, pruning and the removal of things that are dead and decaying, even an extreme amount of pruning and removal, is necessary for health and growth. So the chopping commenced!

In the time that Isaiah wrote his prophecy, the Lord saw fit to do some "chopping." At least that is the image that Isaiah uses. It might be better to call it discipline. The Lord, our Heavenly Father, saw it necessary to discipline his chosen people, Israel. Like the mature fig tree that bore no fruit and the bush that had layers of dead branches right underneath a green, lively-looking outer layer, so also God's people were living contradictory and deceptive lives. They were God's chosen people that he redeemed and bought back to be his very own and live in right relationship with him. Yet, they were not acting like his children. They were not honoring his holy Will expressed in the Ten Commandments. They were not living holy lives toward one another. Isaiah does not waste any time letting them know this either. In the opening

verses of his Prophecy he says, “Children have I reared and brought up, but they have rebelled against me” (Is 1:2). In word, thought, action, and deed the Lord’s Israel, his chosen children had disgraced and defamed him and his name.

As a result Israel was not bearing good fruit. They were the Lord’s chosen Vineyard that he cared for and preserved but they were yielding nothing but sour grapes (Is 5:4). So the Lord, like a truly loving and faithful parent, began to discipline his Israel. For King Solomon in all his wisdom reminds us in the book of Proverbs that “the Lord disciplines the one he loves” (Prov 12:6). We might call it “tough love.” Our Lord is determined to have holy, righteous, and obedient children that “love him with all their heart, soul, mind, and strength, and love their neighbor as themselves” (Mt 22:37). This is what he desires of all of us as his children. To reach that Holiness goal our Holy God uses his Word of Law to do his pruning and chopping. In Isaiah’s time the mighty nation of Assyria was the Lord’s axe.

I would like to return to the chopped down bush for a moment. I never mentioned to you who actually reduced that bush to a stump. To be sure, he got the permission of the Board of Properties before he did it. I also got his permission to reveal his identity. It was a Pastor! Pastor Puls was the one who sliced that super-sized sapling to a slender stump! Ordinarily that detail would not be significant. Yet, for our purposes this morning I think it is very significant. “Chopping” or disciplining is part of the work that God Calls Pastors to do. Literal chopping is not part of their Call, that is just a “fringe benefit.” Called and ordained Pastors are Called by congregations even today to fill God’s Office of the Public Ministry. They are Called to be public servants of the Word of God in local parishes. They are Called to be God’s Public representatives for his local congregations to speak God’s Word of Law and Gospel. When they speak God’s Word of Law they do his “chopping” and disciplining work.

Like Prophets and Apostles in the Bible they are to remind God’s chosen children, his New Israel, of his Holy Will and expectations according to the Ten Commandments. Pastors speak God’s Law in order to show God’s people their Sin and the full, eternal consequences of remaining and living in it without repentance. It is messy, uncomfortable work. It is “chopping” work. But they have to do it if they are to be faithful to their Call. To be sure, they should be speaking the truth of God’s Law in love and with great compassion. Yet, they must speak it. God Called Pastors to Shepherd and lead his people, to preach Christ and to keep them in Christ. To reach the goal of keeping God’s people in Christ, Pastors also speak God’s Word of Gospel that sprouts forgiveness, life, and salvation after the Law has done its “chopping” and disciplining work.

The Gospel shoot is the image that Isaiah gives us on this Second Sunday in Advent. He proclaims for us Israel’s life that grows from the stump-like existence to which it has been reduced. For our God who is both fully just and fully merciful, who speaks fully Law and fully Gospel, the Gospel Word of life, forgiveness, and salvation is always the word that wants to prevail. It is this Gospel Word of grace that he wants to prevail in your life and the life of your friends and families and all people. For this reason God comes to us as a shoot from the stump of Jesse, King David’s father.

Jesus comes as the Righteous One born in a small way as a small child in a small, insignificant town. Like a shoot from a stump this righteous one comes into an unrighteous world in a lowly, humble way. Yet, this Righteous One has power. The Spirit of God, the Holy Spirit rests upon him. He has all wisdom and understanding and counsel and might. And unlike his ancestors, this Israel-reduced-to-one Messiah actually fears the Lord (Is 11:2). He delights in the Law of the

Lord. He is faithful to his Heavenly Father. He comes to bring God's justice and "chop down" all that is contrary to God and his Will through an instrument we call the Cross. From the "stump like" wood of his cross a Gospel shoot sprouts forth. His life-giving body and blood flows forth for an entire world. Where hearts and minds and lives come into contact with his life giving body and blood God does his "chopping down" work so new life can sprout forth. In a manner like our Lord's resurrection three days after his work on the cross, those that are marked with his body and his blood rise to new life. And his Spirit now rests upon them to bear the fruit of his Divine peace.

You are united to this righteous one. Like a branch to a vine you are united to Christ. You have received his life-giving body and blood. You have received his pardoning Word of forgiveness. You have been R-A-Z-E-D through the chopping work of God's Law so that that you can be raised to new life through the life-filled Word of God's Gospel. *Now* you share in his peace. This Advent season you can be confident that your God has come to make peace for you. He continues to come to you through the work of his Pastors who deliver his Word and Sacraments to keep you in his peace. He will come again as he has promised to restore the whole creation to the state of peace with God that it was once intended to be. What a picture it is that Isaiah gives us. Starting with a shoot from a stump God regrows his Garden and gives you a place to dwell within its hedges. Amen.