

# A SHOOT AND A STUMP

---

**ISAIAH 11:1-10; MATTHEW 3:1-10**

**LETHBRIDGE MENNONITE CHURCH**

**BY: RYAN DUECK**

**DECEMBER 8, 2013/2<sup>ND</sup> SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

This morning, on this second Sunday of Advent, I want to hold two images from the book of Isaiah before us.

Two images to guide our reflecting upon the two texts of Scripture we have heard read aloud this morning. Two images to keep with us for the remainder of this Advent season, as we make our way to the child in the manger.

A shoot. And a stump.

As we heard, Isaiah 11 begins like this:

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots...*

What is Isaiah talking about?

Let's start with the stump.

And to do that, we'll need to take a quick tour through parts of Isaiah. To begin, we will rewind two short verses, to the end of Isaiah 10:

<sup>33</sup> Look, the Sovereign, the LORD of hosts,  
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;  
the tallest trees will be cut down,  
and the lofty will be brought low.

<sup>34</sup> He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,  
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

Or we could look to Isaiah 6:11-13, where Isaiah asks the Lord how long the judgment upon his people for their idolatry and injustice will last:

<sup>11</sup> Then I said, “How long, O Lord?” And he said:  
“Until cities lie waste  
without inhabitant,  
and houses without people,  
and the land is utterly desolate;  
<sup>12</sup> until the LORD sends everyone far away,  
and vast is the emptiness in the midst of the land.  
<sup>13</sup> Even if a tenth part remain in it,  
it will be burned again,  
like a terebinth or an oak  
whose stump remains standing  
when it is felled.”  
The holy seed is its stump.

So, the stump is this image of what’s left after the judgment of God.

Why?

A bit of a longer passage from Isaiah 1:11-17:

Hear the word of the LORD...

<sup>11</sup> What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?  
says the LORD;  
I have had enough of burnt offerings of rams  
and the fat of fed beasts;  
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,  
or of lambs, or of goats.  
<sup>12</sup> When you come to appear before me,  
who asked this from your hand?  
Trample my courts no more;  
<sup>13</sup> bringing offerings is futile;  
incense is an abomination to me.  
New moon and sabbath and calling of convocation—  
I cannot endure solemn assemblies with iniquity.  
<sup>14</sup> Your new moons and your appointed festivals  
my soul hates;  
they have become a burden to me,  
I am weary of bearing them.  
<sup>15</sup> When you stretch out your hands,  
I will hide my eyes from you;  
even though you make many prayers,  
I will not listen;

your hands are full of blood.  
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;  
remove the evil of your doings  
from before my eyes;  
cease to do evil,  
17 learn to do good;  
seek justice,  
rescue the oppressed,  
defend the orphan,  
plead for the widow.

There are many other passages that we could look at, but the overall picture in Isaiah is that of a once healthy and strong tree—the people of Israel—being reduced to a stump by God, through foreign armies, due to their failure to do and to be what God had commanded them to do and to be.

Where there was once a lush forest or a healthy tree, there is now charred ground. Where there was once life and vitality and beauty and promise, there now seems only to be only an ugly, lifeless stump, a visual reminder of what once was, but is no longer.

**The stump is a picture of desolation, of judgment, of hopelessness.**

In our gospel text today, we encounter this theme through a different image.

John the Baptist comes preaching a message of repentance out of the wilderness.

“Wilderness” represents the same sorts of things as “stump.” Think of the Israelites wandering around in the wilderness in the book of Exodus.

The wilderness can stand for a place of testing, a place of refinement, rebellion, suffering, fidelity, and more.

We know that in the next chapter of Matthew, Jesus will head into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil.

“Wilderness,” like “stump,” is a harsh word. It speaks of a time of trial and suffering, a place of crisis, a place where God seems far away.

And coming out of this context, John's words are harsh—particularly to the religious experts.

*You brood of vipers!, he says to them. Start living lives that produce the fruit of righteousness! Don't cling to your religious heritage or your ethnic identity as if that will save you! God can raise up children of God from a bunch of lifeless stones!!*

**The axe is at the root of the tree!, Jesus says, calling to mind this image of a stump from Isaiah.**

Like in Isaiah six hundred years earlier, the people of God were not living as they ought to have been. The Pharisees and the Sadducees, in particular, had done exactly what the religious leaders in Isaiah's time had done, building up elaborate fences and rules and regulations around the performance of religion, while neglecting the weightier matters of justice and compassion for the poor. They had made the law—the law that was given by God to lead to life—an unbearable burden for ordinary people, piling up lifeless rules and rituals, and dealing out only death.

So both in Isaiah and Matthew, our texts come in the midst of a time of crisis, a time of judgment and disorientation. A time of hopelessness.

---

But, it's not all bad news this morning. As we read earlier in Isaiah, the stump also contains the seed of something new.

Out of the stump... comes life.

Our text from Isaiah points to hope growing out of the darkest and most seemingly hopeless places.

But the shoot that comes out of the stump is not some vague hope that the dawn always precedes the sunrise or anything like that.

No, the shoot is a **person**. A descendent of the line of Jesse, an heir to the kingdom of David.

The spirit of the Lord will rest upon this shoot, the Spirit of counsel and might, of the knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

This shoot will embody justice and righteousness for the poor and the needy, and judgment for the wicked.

*And perhaps, most unexpectedly, this shoot will not be a mighty conquering warrior, but shall come in the form of a child.*

*A child shall lead them...*

Nearly six hundred years before Jesus arrives on the scene, we have this hint of a very different kind of king who rules in a very different kind of way—a king whose rule exercised not through domination, oppression, and exploitation (ways that the world has always been so familiar with), but through righteousness, justice, truth, and the knowledge of the Lord.

We are given this beautiful collection of images where the natural and social orders are restored and redeemed in the reign of the one who is to come:

- the wolf shall live with the lamb
- the leopard with the kid
- the calf and the lion and the fatling together (I was going to show you a picture that Dennis and Helen showed us at the coffee hour on Friday morning. It was a picture of an elephant and a lion lying not five meters from each other!)
- the cow and the bear graze together along with their young
- the lion shall eat straw like an ox
- young children shall play without fear near snakes!

*They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isa 11:9).*

This term “all my holy mountain” was not just about Mt. Zion or the city of Jerusalem but was a way of speaking of the *entirety of God’s transformed world*.

And then, there is this marvelous promise in verse 10 that the Root of Jesse will as stand as a banner for *all peoples—the nations will rally to him*.

The Apostle Paul picks up on this theme in another text from this week’s readings in Romans that we didn’t have time to read. Romans 15:12:

“The root of Jesse shall come,  
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;  
in him the Gentiles shall hope.”

Way back in Genesis 12, the people of Israel were called into existence to be blessed by God *and to be a blessing to the nations*. Now, in this shoot coming out of the stump of judgment, this is being fulfilled.

---

So, we have these two images. A stump and a shoot, one signifying judgment, hopelessness, and futility, the other signifying hope and promise.

These two images are not hard to map on to our own world and our own lives.

This past Thursday, the world mourned the passing of former South African president Nelson Mandela. Today was declared a national day of prayer and reflection across South Africa, but people are praying and reflecting far beyond the borders of Mandela’s home nation.

Why did this man’s story captivate us?

I think it’s because we see these themes, shoot and stump, at work in his life.

Mandela knew all about the stump, the wilderness. He spent much of life fighting against the brutal, and brutally racist system of apartheid. He knew much of injustice, spending 27 years in prison for treason.

Like the people of Israel in Isaiah’s time, in Matthew’s time, he was well acquainted with injustice, poverty, and the abuse of religion.

And yet out of these stump-y times, Mandela walked out of his prison cell in 1990 and led his nation on a journey of reconciliation, forgiveness, and a more hopeful future.

Out of the darkness, light.

Out of despair, hope.

Out of injustice, righteousness.

Out of ignorance, truth.

Out of violence, peace.

Out of the stump, a shoot.

Out of the wilderness, good news.

Mandela's story moves us because we so desperately want and need it to be true in our own lives.

We all go through stump-y times. Times when the world seems bleak and hopeless. Times when the way forward seems unclear. Times when our sin catches up with us, and everything seems out of joint. Times when we have done nothing wrong, but the brokenness of our world is just too much to bear.

We need good news. We need this shoot out of the stump of Jesse to come. We need this hope.

The message to us on this second Sunday of Advent is no different than it has ever been for the people of God.

It is a twofold message.

**First, produce fruit!**

Advent is not about a complacent hope. It is not about passively folding our hands and contemplating the beautiful mystery that light comes out of dark places.

Repentance is an important part of Advent.

As our texts remind us, *the axe is at the root of the tree*. And the tree will be chopped down if it doesn't bear the fruit of righteousness.

Advent is about realigning our lives with the God who comes to us and living lives that are characterized by righteousness and justice for the poor and the oppressed. Advent is about committing ourselves to live according to the truth and pursuing the knowledge of the Lord. Advent is about opening our door to the stranger and welcoming in the outside because we believe that the Root of Jesse

is the hope of *all* people. Advent is about renewing our commitment to be people whose lives give evidence of the fruit of the spirit.

Love, peace, joy, self-control, patience, gentleness, faithfulness...

If we are not pursuing these things, the word to us is the same as it was to the people in Isaiah's day, in John the Baptist's day... *The axe is at the root of the tree...*

**But the second challenge is to renew our hope in this little shoot, the root of Jesse that comes out of the stump.**

It is to be inspired by this vision of the peaceable kingdom and to worship the God who promises to bring it about.

It is also recognize that *only* God can bring it about.

For all of Nelson Mandela's marvelous qualities and for all of the hope that he signified, South Africa is not the peaceable kingdom today. It is a nation that is still characterized by enormous racial tensions, brutal violence (particularly against women), and much injustice.

The same is true around the world and in our own lives.

We know that we cannot produce the deepest change that we need in our world and in our lives.

We do not bring about the peaceable kingdom described in Isaiah 11. This is a God-sized task.

But we can participate in it. We can always be striving to align ourselves *with* and live according *to* the hope of the world that has come and is coming in Jesus Christ.

May God help us to produce fruit in keeping with repentance.

May God help us to be drawn ever forward by this vision of a peaceable kingdom that has come and is coming through this little shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Amen.

