

Advent Promises: A New Budding Branch
Isaiah 11:1-10

A lone elm tree stood in the middle of a parking lot, surrounded by concrete and cars, outside the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City, Oklahoma on April 19, 1995 when a 4,000 pound bomb exploded killing 168 people, wounding 850 and destroying multiple buildings. The tree was buried in rubble with all signs of life gone. In the aftermath some wanted to cut the dusty, branch-stripped tree down to recover evidence embedded in its trunk and limbs. But while they were deciding what to do she began to bud. Sprouts pressed through damaged bark; green leaves pushed away gray soot. Life resurrected from an acre of death. And people noticed. For the community it became a symbol of hope and today it flourishes with new growth and is known as the Survivor Tree.

Friends, this is a modern day example of the Advent promise proclaimed in the 8th century before Christ's birth. The Advent promise that Isaiah gave voice to and that every generation since has clung to for through nature we have witnessed this image come to life over and over again. It is the promise of Advent - the promise that something new is happening. Walter Bruggemann once said: "Advent is the insistence that "coming soon" is the great "plus" of the newness that is "at hand" but not yet visible. (Walter Bruggemann, Journal for Preachers, Advent 2007, p. 11)

That is what Isaiah's vision provides for us. The first sighting of a shoot - a new growth out of what we thought was dead - a stump. We have all seen tree stumps. Just this week my neighbors cut down a large pine tree and there is now just a stump left in their side yard. The sight of tree stumps reminds us that the life of the tree has been cut down. And yet we have also seen stumps that appeared dead and decaying with a new growth sprouting from its center or its sides. It is part of God's amazing creation that regeneration can happen. God created the world in such a way that new life can come from what seems dead.

Isaiah masterfully used this image to portray what was happening during the reign of King Ahaz of Judah in the Syro-Ephraimite war. For systematically all that Israel and Judah had was being cut down and reduced to stumps. But Isaiah speaks a word of promise into that world. A word of promise that continues to offer hope into our world today. For he proclaims that from the stump - from the stump of Jesse who was King David's father - something new was still possible through God's creative powers. A shoot of new growth.

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

The shoot comes from the stump and from that shoot will grow a branch. Why? Because of its root system. When you cut down a tree you do not necessarily kill the roots - that is why so many people either grind the stump or remove the entire root system when really trying to remove the tree from the area. As long as the root system is still present there is a possibility of new growth. From this new branch that is attached to its roots there is hope of new life.

This is the Advent promise. It might seem like David's kingdom was ending. It might seem like all hope was gone but in God's kingdom there is always hope of regeneration because the roots are deep and lasting. At the base of the Survivor tree in Oklahoma City is this inscription, "The spirit of this city and this nation will not be defeated; our deeply rooted faith sustains us." It is the deeply rooted faith of the Hebrew people that sustained them through the centuries, and continues to sustain us to this day. For within these roots - the roots that are deeply secured in God's soil and nurtured by God's love and grace - we remember the Advent promise that there is a future for God's faithful people.

Isaiah proceeds to describe in powerful terms the one who will bring this future into the world.

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,*

the spirit of counsel and might,

the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And then Isaiah fleshed out how these characteristics would be manifested through action in the one who was to come bringing with him God's kingdom of justice and righteousness.

The spirit of wisdom and understanding would be seen in one who *"shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth"* (vv.3b-4a). For God's understanding of justice and righteousness especially for the poor and meek of the earth is the standard by which this one to come will judge the world. He will not judge by what the world sees or hears or desires. For God's leaders judge impartially and equally for the lowly and marginalized in society not favoring the wealthy and powerful. For God's eyes are always on the needs of the poor and the meek.

The spirit of counsel and might comes through one who will *"strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked"* (v.4b). The one who is to come will speak God's word powerfully into our world of what is right and just by God's standards. And when God's people fail to live by God's word there will be consequences for those failed actions.

The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord is within him for *"Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins"* (v.5). The one who is to come will teach the importance of wearing righteousness and faithfulness like a belt until it shapes our lives in God's ways.

Next Isaiah described the world that would be possible when this new, budding branch ruled. A world radically different from the present world for peace will reign in ways that forever change the natural order of things. Calm and peace will prevail. For not only will the wolf consort peaceably with the lamb, an activity foreign to the nature of both, but their very morphology will undergo transformation. The lion, for example, cannot eat straw. And even though an infant plays around the

nest of a poisonous snake, she will suffer no injury. Indeed, no harm shall come to this kingdom:

*“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.”*

Friends, in a world of chaos - a world filled with struggles and destruction all around - this image of a world of peace and contentment is powerful and yet is hard for us to understand. Just as it must have been for the people of Israel in the midst of all the destruction around them. And yet in this image we discover what God’s peace looks like. A peace that is possible in the midst of the struggles of life.

Some years ago an art contest was held in a Maine seacoast town. Local artists were invited to submit a painting that portrayed the idea of peace. Many entries depicted beautiful idyllic scenes of peaceful landscapes and gentle waters lapping against the shore. But the picture which took first prize showed a rocky seacoast in the midst of a violent storm. Waves were crashing against the rocks sending the sprays of water high into the air. On the surface of it, the scene was anything but peaceful! However, a closer examination of the painting showed a sea gull, just a tiny bird, huddled in a cleft in the rock. All around the bird, the angry sea pounded on the seacoast, but the little gull shielded by the rock, was safe and secure in the midst of the storm. That is much closer to the Bible's understanding of peace- not an absence of conflict, but a sustaining presence within our troubled lives that keeps us safe and secure in the midst of the turbulence. (<https://sermons.com/sermon/god-s-christmas-greeting/1337287>)

That was the promise to the people of the 8th century and to us today. The promise is that through this new budding branch we are assured that God is present with us even in the midst of the worst the world can offer us. And that is why the final verse is so important to this promise.

*“On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;
the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious”.*

On that day - note that the stump of Jesse is now the root of Jesse - and from that root - from the depths of faith that believe new life is possible from a stump - comes a signal to the peoples. From this root of Jesse buried deep within the soil of God's people will be one whom we can communicate with, one who provides a glorious dwelling place that offers hope and security.

The actual word in Hebrew that is translated dwelling is the word for the resting place of herds. For those who heard this word in the 8th century as nomadic people the fact that the future king would settle, come to rest with the herds, is a significant metaphor. For their life had been a lifelong wandering, searching and moving and would continue to be. But the assurance that God would rest with them wherever they were was powerful. And for those who heard this message in the time of exile these words provided hope of a day to come when God would be revealed in a new way.

It is still the Advent promise for us - a signal to us. For from the stump of Jesse the deep roots imbedded in God will come a new budding branch - a sign of hope for you and for me in the form of a babe lying in a manger...Thanks be to God!