

A STUMP NO MORE

Isaiah 11:1-10

Intro

As soon most of us start to hear the words of this morning's passage we immediately think of one person: Jesus.

I don't mean to make it sound like it's a bad thing: it's not.

We take these very familiar words from Isaiah and from our particular position of faith, we immediately picture the man from Nazareth who was born in that animal outcropping in Bethlehem. That's who we see. We see a hope and peace that has been realized.

However, Christians are not the only ones who look to this passage as words from God: so do the Jews.

A few quick reminders as to how these prophecies came together.

First, Isaiah is an amalgamation of many different prophets over the course of hundreds of years. There was an actual prophet of Isaiah but many of the prophecies that are recorded are from the generations of prophets who emerged out of what is affectionately referred to as Isaiah's prophetic line.

Secondly, to a great extent, the topics that are being spoken of can be placed together into a rather compelling narrative that speaks of a people who have lost their way. These people, through their sinfulness, fall away from the Almighty.

However, through the perseverance of God, they are ultimately brought back into a right relationship with the Divine. In the context of that story, today's passage stands firmly in the section that speaks to the people's brokenness while looking toward a better future.

However, unlike our Christian perspective, this passage is to be heard from a position of yet to be realized hope and peace. For the people who heard and lived through this passage, they looked out at the landscape of their societal life and see that their great leaders are gone. They have either died, or been killed and in both cases it has left their country occupied and their fellow citizens in various states of exile. What they see is a once might tree that has been cut down and is now nothing more than a stump.

When we think of this passage from this perspective, what we begin to experience is a sentiment that is not just about Christ, but about lives, even our lives. Many of us, dare I say most of us, have experienced moments in our lives where all that seems to be left is a stump. Maybe you're facing such a time right now.

What I hope that you are able to hear in these words is that regardless of how bleak things appear to be, that in God hope and peace still remains. The passage reads this way.

Isaiah 11:1-10

11 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The 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. ³His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; ⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. ⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. ⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. ⁷The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. ⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. ⁹They 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.

¹⁰On 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.

"A Stump No More"

Miracles are considered miracles for one simple reason: because what has taken place was frighteningly unexpected and amazingly improbable. We look at what has happened and there is some part of us that says: "the only way that could have happened is with the help of God, because there is no way that we could have created that result even if we tried."

However, when we do this, there are too many times when the large majority of our time is spent looking at the result as opposed to scenario out of which the miracle emerged. In doing this, especially over time, we have a tendency to forget how miraculous the result actually is. It just becomes part of what we see. It becomes the accepted norm.

I think that is what happens when we hear a passage like the one that we have in Isaiah for when we hear this passage, we become transfixed upon the new growth. We see what has grown and we celebrate it.

There are very few times, however, when we think about the pain and difficulty that had to be endured for that miraculous growth to occur. We don't think that this amazing new growth is from a stump: that which is left from something else, something else which, at one time, may have been considered quite miraculous itself. And this is exactly what the stump of Jesse is: a miracle, a miracle that had been cut down.

The stump of Jesse is a reference to King David, the youngest son of his father Jesse. If you remember the story the prophet Samuel has been told to go to Jesse in the town of Bethlehem and it will be from his family line that a new king of Israel will be selected. Jesse has his seven oldest sons walk before the prophet.

None of them are to be anointed by the Lord.

So Samuel asks, “Is this all of them, or is there another?” To this Jesse replies, “yes, my youngest, but he is out watching the sheep.” Ultimately it is David, the youngest, that is anointed to become the great king and leader of the Israelites.

David selection is miraculous. This is the familial line, the family tree that has been, figuratively speaking, cut down. In terms of leadership responsibilities, this tree is dead. People look at the line of Jesse and all they see are stories from a by-gone era. It’s done. It’s over. It isn’t worth talking about anymore.

That’s how definitive the situation is and yet it is out of this stump that a new, even more miraculous growth is to take place. This new leader that is foretold of is miraculous, but what makes him miraculous is not just the work that is to be done through him but just as importantly the context out of which the leader arises. The people who are listening to these prophetic words are being asked to believe that not only will someone arise to lead them, but that the person who will lead them is from a family line that was thought to be devoid.

This is a situation where the people need to place their trust and their reliance on God, because if all they do is look at the situation of the world, all they’re going to be able to think to themselves is, “yeah right. There is no way that this can happen.”

But when they look to God, what these words offer is pure unadulterated hope and yes, peace. When they look to God, these words from Isaiah become a chance at something being reborn, being made anew, being made right.

But it’s only when the focus is on God.

Hope is found, not in placing our trust in ourselves or in the things of the world, but when we place our reliance on God.

For example, of the 12 steps in Alcoholic Anonymous (which is mirrored in multiple other 12 step programs) seven of the steps (seven!) mention God specifically and all of them help the person who has been cut down to stump level to realize that regardless of what the world may say, there is hope and if there is hope, peace.

There was hope for the Israelites even after many of them thought hope was lost when the tree of Jesse came toppling down; there is hope for the countless numbers of people who are involved in groups such as AA even after many of their families, and many of them personally thought that they had become a slave to addiction; there is hope for you in whatever you may be facing.

One of the unspoken rules of preaching during the Advent season is that you’re supposed to keep it upbeat: after all you’re talking about the birth of the One who is the savior of the world, so why wouldn’t it be joy-filled?

However, the reality is that for far too many folks, Christmas is a really difficult time: a time when we look at our lives and think, “I may not be cut down to the stump, but I’m starting to feel like the branches are falling down all around me.”

This could be because of the death or sickness of a loved one; the fact that any financial issues that exist only become exacerbated during the Christmas season; it could be that a relationship, with your spouse, your child, a friend, or a co-worker is just leaving you at wits end, moving in a persistently negative direction; or maybe just because you're not as happy as everyone keeps telling you should be.

Whatever it is, there are people, people you know (maybe even the person you see when you look in the mirror) who are looking out at their world and what they are seeing is a life that is a stump in the making. If they do see any hope, it is far and fleeting, and the question of, "what can I do" just keeps echoing in the recesses of their mind.

Here's the thing: "what can I do" is the wrong question.

The correct question is, "what will God do when I place my trust in Him?"

The first three steps of AA are the following: 1. admit we were powerless and that our lives had become unmanageable. 2. believe that a Power greater than ourselves can restore us to sanity. 3. Made a decision to turn our will and our lives over to the care of God. What does that sound like to you?

To me, that is finding and placing our trust in the Divine.

When we do this, when we begin to take these steps, we will begin to recognize that our lives are a stump no more: that regardless of how cut down we may feel in any and every part of our lives, that something new, something pure, something of God can and will begin to grow.

In this season of Advent hope is alive. Hope is alive if you are willing to turn your life over to God and this peace can come. It's easier said than done but when it happens the hope and peace that you will receive will flow through your life in such a way that you'll wonder why you waited so long. The Almighty is there for you in whatever situation you may need it. Trust it. Believe it. Allow that new growth that is of God to begin.

After Sermon Prayer

God, it can be so frighteningly easy to fall into the mentality that our lives are without hope, or that hope is some kind of a visitor who rarely visits. God, help us to heed the example that we have heard in our passage this morning that if we are willing to believe and trust in You that we will be able to see Your hope as it springs forth from even the most unlikely of places. Lord, let it be so. Amen.