

Shoot from the Stump in the Advent of Trump

Adapted from a Sermon by the Rev. John Davies

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Scripture: Isaiah 11.1-10

*“11:1 A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*² 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.*

³ His 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;*

*⁴ but 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.*

*⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*⁶ The 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.*

*⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

*⁹ 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.*

10 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.”

Matthew 3.1-12

3:1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. 3This 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.” ’*

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

7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9Do 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. 10Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

11 I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12His 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.”’

Sermon:

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

(Isaiah 11:1)

In the 8th Century BC, the Assyrians were expanding their empire with extreme ruthlessness. They destroyed the northern kingdom of Israel in 722 BC, and in the southern kingdom of Judah, the weak king, Ahaz, became a vassal of these dreaded, powerful pagans.

Imperial Assyrian propaganda proclaimed the supremacy of their god, Ashur, and declared that the conquered peoples had been abandoned by their gods. The tribes of Israel, the sons and daughters of David, the people of Jesse’s line

were absolutely broken. Their kings had failed them. Their cities were laid waste. They were cut low like a tree stump.

But suddenly, in the midst of this utter devastation and desperate situation, the voice of God is heard through the Prophet Isaiah. He has a remarkable vision to share:

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

They heard the promise of a new king, from the stump of King David’s line, a Messiah who would finally lead them into God’s way of peace. They would become a community of peace in a hurting world, Isaiah told them, so that one day all would live on God’s holy mountain without fear of hurt or destruction.

*“They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;” (Isaiah 11:9)
“when the earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters
cover the sea.” (Hymn # 534)*

The American Chestnut tree was a magnificent tree. Vast forests of chestnut trees blanketed the Appalachian Mountain range for two thousand miles from New England down through the southern states. The whole ecosystem and economy of this vast region of America depended in large part upon this remarkable tree. First, the wild life and the Native Americans, and then the colonial settlers after them made a good living from this one tree. It grew to great size providing shelter and producing eatable nuts, excellent lumber, even the bark was useful for tanning leather. If ever there were a tree from the Garden of Eden of long ago, surely the American Chestnut tree was one.

Sadly, because of human foolishness, a great blight struck the chestnut tree and it began to die off all throughout the Appalachian region. The timber industry, fearful that the trees would become too diseased for lumber, rushed to cut them all down. The forests of the once mighty, American Chestnut trees were decimated and riddled with tree stumps. This tragic story contributed to the downward economic spiral of this vast region of America and the suffering and poverty of the Appalachian peoples.

But, even amidst this desperate situation, there is hope. For those stumps are not all dead. Here and there in the deep recesses of the forests and mountains, a shoot comes out from a stump. The blight almost always kills it back, but over the years, the tree stumps produce stronger new growth. Scientists have been cross breeding this new growth with other breeds of chestnut and producing new trees capable of withstanding the blight. And they think that given time, the mighty American Chestnut Tree may indeed return on its own, too.

The shoot from the stump. What a wonderful image of quiet, gentle rebirth in a world where all seems broken. What a marvelous picture of hope when so much hope has been abandoned. “A Shoot from the Stump (in the Advent of

~~Trump.)~~” If we open our eyes, we can see it breaking forth everywhere: the soldier who lost a limb in Afghanistan now competing at top level sports; the recovering addict; the hard-nosed businessman who, after surviving a stroke, gives up a lucrative career to become a full-time foster father. Shoots from the stumps.

What drives people to see the potential for positive change in their lives even at the moment when all seems lost, and follow the hunch that makes change possible? What, or who, is that force which brings life to a devastated people, green growth from a blighted stump? ~~John the Evangelist knew when he said, “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.” Paul knew when he told the Colossians “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created,..”~~

~~The force which brings life to a devastated people and a dead stump~~ It’s the one John the Baptist witnesses to, that’s who.

Now, I feel for old John. He knew that he was there to announce the coming of the One who would lead the people into freedom, restoration, and salvation. But John the Baptist is old school. His image of the Messiah is the vengeful, old god that looks just like the gods of the violent Assyrians, a god who wields an ax and cuts his enemies down in wrathful judgement. John hadn’t fully discerned the true voice of God heard in the scriptures: the voice of the generous, creator God; the voice of the life-giver; the voice of the One who comes and transforms the world peaceably; the shoot from the stump.

I received a farewell present from ~~my last~~ a church I served as Interim Rector, a framed print of one in a series of my favourite American paintings by the Quaker artist Edward Hicks. He created his art in the early 1800s. The print is entitled “The Peaceable Kingdom” and is based on the Isaiah prophesy heard for our 1st Lesson today. I’ve displayed it ~~on the piano~~ here for you to look at as you come up for communion. The Peaceable Kingdom is a vision of the true God the Prophet Isaiah gave voice to.

But it took Jesus himself to reveal the voice of God completely and clearly. He is the one who teaches us to never strike back in vengeance and to love even our enemies. Most importantly, he is the one who stood in the breach of the evil of his day and became the tree cut-off on the cross. He let himself become the stump, so that on Easter morning a new shoot of life and peace could spring forth. And on Easter evening he passed on that peace to you and me. “*Even as the Father has sent me,*” he says, “*so I send you.*” He sends us out with the power of forgiveness and healing and new life and hope.

I believe that we live at a special time in history when a new shoot is sprouting. Humankind was laid-low in the aftermath of two terrible world wars last

century. There are now newer threats of terrorism and growing bigotry. For the first time in history, we possess weapons that can utterly destroy us, if we are foolish enough to use them. I have never known a world without these terrible, nuclear weapons. Some of ~~my elders here with us this morning~~, you may remember a world without these diabolical instruments of death and destruction. They are an inheritance for which I am not grateful, and, if I could, I would unmake them all. Looking at the state of things, we may be inclined to despair.

But I want to encourage you this Advent ~~of Trump~~, the Shoot from the Stump is growing. The Church is being slowly revived to see completely and clearly its message once again that the wrath and violence are ours, never God's. God in the cross of Jesus absorbed our hurt and destruction and is turning it into new life.

So, a newly widowed woman, after a time of grief and healing, begins to befriend and accompany other widows and widowers. An addict laid low by addiction slowly regains his life through the spirituality of the Twelve Steps and becomes a sponsor for another addict to walk the path to sobriety. A soldier suffering from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) finds healing, renounces war, becomes a nonviolent activist and volunteers to work with other wounded veterans.

I have hope for the future because the force that brought hope to an ancient, devastated people and new life from a dead stump is alive and active in the world.

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and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”*

Source: Sermon by the Rev. John Davies - Notes from a Small Vicar.
Girardian Text Week