

Sermon
Dec. 4, 2016
Isaiah 11.1-10
Living with Stumps

I come from a family that knows wood...

- Grandfather and sawmill. Passed on to my dad and my uncle.
- As kids, played in huge pile of sawdust, hide and seek in the mill with its smell of freshly cut wood, riding the wooden carts where the finished cuts of wood would be stacked.
- Loved going with my dad over to the mill riding on the log loader with him as he unloaded logs from a truck, or skipping along a long line of logs as he measured the ends and calculated the amount of lumber from each.
- This translated into my dad being able to tell the kind of tree by the leaves and bark. And teaching us kids whenever we were in the presences of trees.
- We grew up in the presence of wood chopped, sawed, marked, stacked, chiseled, and cut into various useful things whether decorative or practical.
- Even now when my family gets together at our cabin, it's rare that we aren't doing something with wood. Whether cutting down a dead tree, trimming back branches on an overgrown one, or chopping and stacking firewood for the stove.

Despite the fact that currently I don't have much to do with wood, I come from a family that knows wood.

The Israelites also know wood...but in a different way. They know the many images of wood used by their prophets and poets describing the righteous or the fallen; the nations or themselves.

From Psalm 92

The righteous flourish like the palm tree,
and grow like a cedar in Lebanon...
In old age they still produce fruit;
they are always green and full of sap

Or the more familiar, Psalm 1 where those who delight in God's ways are
...like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

Or in Ezekial 31 God is describing Assyria before it was toppled

Consider Assyria, a cedar of Lebanon,
with fair branches and forest shade,
and of great height,
its top among the clouds.

Therefore thus says the Lord GOD: Because it^[c] towered high and set its top among the clouds,^[d] and its heart was proud of its height,¹¹ I gave it into the hand of the prince of

the nations...its branches have fallen, and its boughs lie broken in all the watercourses of the land;

And at the end of Isaiah chapter 10...the verses right before today's Scripture from chapter 11.

This very day he will halt at Nob,
he will shake his fist
at the mount of daughter Zion,
the hill of Jerusalem.

³³ 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.

³⁴ He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees^[d] will fall.

The axe falls. The lofty brought low. The prophet describes the devastation of Jerusalem.

And afterward, what is left? Stumps.

Rough, chopped off reminders of what was once tall and beautiful.

Stumps. The dead hopes of what could have been.

At the end of chapter 10, the people are left living with stumps.

In the context of Isaiah 11, the stump represents the failure of the royal line of David. The specific failure is unclear. It may represent a specific historical reign, like Judah's King Ahaz, who sought safety and help in foreign religions as well as the King of Assyria more than in God. Or King Amon, who was devoted to false gods leading to his assassination after ruling only two years. Or the stump could refer to a historical event like the exile of the people in the 6th century, where the monarch of David's line was chopped down.

In any case, it's fair to say that this image of a stump would have described several different times in Israel's history where there is devastating consequences or hardships.

Yes, the people of Israel know wood. And the feeling of living with stumps.

Yet into this reality, comes the image of a shoot, a sprig of life, coming out of the barren, dead, stump. God's promise of new life. Of hope. The vision of God's ways in full capacity. Which includes a righteous ruler.

In the context of Isaiah, this ruler is a king whose primary function is to judge fairly, so that everyone is assured of well-being and security. Someone who is not swayed just by what is seen or heard. But by God's view of righteousness, right relationships, and justice.

Walter Brueggemann in his commentary on Isaiah, describes this ruler as someone who is not: "...influenced by gestures of the wealthy or swayed by the manipulations of the powerful." He goes on to say: "This 'theory of government' [from Isaiah 11] is not primarily concerned to create free space for 'the working of the market' in the hands of the powerful or for the policing of personal morality, but for the maintenance of economic viability for all members of society."

Making the point that God's realm is not driven by money or the interests of a few...not driven by the 1%, or corporations with excessive profits to gain, or those with power of skin color, legal status, or accepted sexual orientation and gender identity. God's realm is instead marked by a ruler that makes well-being, shalom, possible for all.

This new world will be safe for all, even the most vulnerable. Especially the most vulnerable.

Hard to not think about how nice THAT would be in our country right about January 20th! Or in the many countries around the world whose governments do not serve all of their people.

But back to Isaiah, this ruler and realm of God, marked by the reordering of human relationships, makes possible the reordering of nature. Where the wolf and the lamb, the calf and lion, the child and snake live in harmony. What gets termed the peaceable kingdom.

Yet this vision of creation is not separate from the verses before it about the righteous ruler. Rather this peaceable kingdom is a continuation of the righted human relationships that ensure justice and well-being for all. A harmony that goes to the core of creation, not just stays with humankind.

This is the vision, the promise, that comes in the midst of living with stumps. It comes for the people of ancient Israel. And it comes for us.

As Anabaptist Christians, we see the realm of God coming in the person of Jesus. He lived out this vision of a new order described in Isaiah 11. And was crucified because of it.

We believe that in his incarnation and ministry the realm of God has begun to unfold, not just in heaven, but here on earth. As John the Baptist proclaims in the gospel of Matthew: "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near."

And although God's realm is far from complete here on earth, it also is not just a vision for the future. It is present in the places, times, and spaces where God's love and justice can be found. The times when hatred, destruction, inequity, unfaithfulness, injustice, deception, and disregard for God is reordered into right relationship, justice, well-being. Where harmony flourishes, but not at the cost of power imbalance or manipulation.

And we are invited into this movement of God...this vision of God's realm unfolding now. The promise of emerging shoots coming from barren-looking stumps.

Yet we, like the people of Israel, continue to live with stumps. Places that feel barren, hopeless, dead, or out of our control. Some of which are through our own doing. Some of which are not. The realities around and within us. Whether in our personal relationships, or in our work and school situations, or our inner struggles, in our health, in our city's systems, or in the divides of this nation, or in the fear of what is to come in our next presidency.

While we know God's promise of the sprig of life, at times it's difficult to hold on to. We are bombarded with the realities of this world and its unsettled quality. We are flooded with shame at the ways we are continually stuck or obsessed or driven.

We continue to live with stumps.

In her article "This Luminous Darkness: Searching for Solace in Advent and Christmas," Jan Richardson says:

"The gorgeous texts of Advent, Christmas, and Epiphany shimmer with the light that God brings into our midst...yet if we lean too quickly toward the light, we miss seeing one of the greatest gifts this season has to offer us: that the deepest darkness is the place where God comes to us. In the womb, in the night, in the dreaming; when we are lost, when our world has come undone, when we cannot see the next step on the path; in all the darkness that attends our life, whether hopeful darkness or horrendous, God meets us...For the Christ who was born two millennia ago, for the Christ who seeks to be born in us this day, the darkness is where incarnation begins."

God meets us in midst of darkness. When we can't find our way. When our world has become undone. When hope is lost. God meets us in the midst of stumps.

This Advent may we find courage to keep watching for the shoot of life coming from our stumps. May we be alert to Christ birthing something in us, our city, the church, and the world.

And may we find strength to join in God's movement towards a world more like the vision cast in Isaiah 11. Where tribalism, divisions, power-over are being reordered and rearranged to bring harmony and wholeness for all of creation.

For we are loved by the God who knows wood. Especially the wood that springs forth in new life. Amen.

~ Lorie Hershey

Isaiah 11:1-10

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump 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.