

Advent 2 Year A (RCL)
December 4, 2022
New Song Church
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Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

Out From the Stump: Hope Beyond Hope

“It’s time for a change!” the prophet Isaiah proclaims to the people of Judah. Enough of Assyria’s haughty attempts to conquer and destroy the lands of Judah and Israel with the power of the sword and their superior strength. Enough of the northern kingdom of Israel’s attempts to coerce the southern kingdom of Judah to join forces with them against Assyria. Enough of warfare, of injustice, of exploiting the land, of trampling the poor, and of taking advantage of the weak. Enough of King Ahaz’s incompetent leadership over Judah. It may look as though all is lost, and as though nothing is left for Judah, but Isaiah reminds Judah that God is still here, and because God is present all is not lost. From what looks like a dried up stump – a dead end for the kingdom of Judah, a tender green tendril of life that defies death will sprout forth from the stump and grow. God will do a new and surprising thing through a new king and that will change everything. According to Isaiah:

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.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He will judge with justice and equity and righteousness, the characteristics

we would hope for in all of those who have power over others.

This is how hope gets started – it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place.

Where might there be stumps in our own life? – things that make us feel cut off from God, from those we love, from good health, or from the rest of the world. Stumps can take many forms. For some their stump is grief, for others it takes the form of a medical diagnosis, of a feeling of despair, of a spiritual life that feels empty and disconnected from God. Or perhaps our stump is the realization that a dream we've cherished will never be realized and we have to let it go once and for all. Stumps feel like dead ends – like places lacking life and without hope.

Whatever form our particular stump takes, can we imagine, even in the midst of our own sense of darkness and loss, that God might be nurturing the growth of something new and good and filled with light? Can we remain open to possibility that exists beyond what we can see in the present moment? Might there be a tender green shoot waiting and ready to break free from the stumps in our lives to reach toward the sun? Can we trust God to do a new thing in us? Can we trust God to do a new thing in our hurting world?

Because that is what Advent is about. It is a time of waiting, not only for the Christ-child to be born, but for possibility to sprout in our lives, in our church, in our world. And while we know that Christmas will not magically transform either us or the world, we can trust that God is working in and among us, and that transformation is, in fact, happening. In the promise of

Christmas, we can trust that God sees our pain, our fears, and our suffering, and loves us enough to become one of us. Such is the joy and the promise of the Incarnation.

In Isaiah's vision, the reign of a righteous king will lead to a whole new world in which the land will be healed and ex-predators and their former prey will coexist peacefully – where wolves will wag their tails instead of baring their fangs, and timid sheep will find their voice. Lest we underestimate the relevance of Isaiah's vision, a quick check of the news of any given day is enough to make us painfully aware of the pervasiveness of predators among us – those lying in wait for the least sign of weakness or vulnerability that can be used to their advantage. The text takes evil seriously and we should as well. As commentator Paul Simpson Duke notes, it “has its eye on the deadly aggressions and fears that sicken the world, the ending of which can be envisioned only in a far-future tense. A thoroughly healed creation is imagined, nothing less than Eden remade.”ⁱ Yes, the vision takes the reality of evil seriously, but it takes equally seriously the power of God to transform us and our world.

If we dare to look, I expect that we will see both predator and prey within ourselves, as most of us have tendencies toward both. We can ask, what can I do to tame my inner predator – to cultivate kindness, patience, and generosity of spirit in the place of aggression, jealousy, and self-centeredness? What can we do to use our voices and our actions to bring justice to the oppressed, to share the power we have with those who have none, and to make the world more equitable for all?

As Stacey Simpson Duke notes in her commentary on Isaiah, “Advent is a good time for reexamining our old assumptions and definitions, including how we think of and use power. In Christ, power has been reinterpreted. How might our own lives be reinterpreted in his light? How might our own lives be remade—so that the wolf and the lamb within us live together in a new kind of harmony? Our own lives can become peaceable kingdoms when subjected to the judgment and transformation of Christ.”ⁱⁱ

Allowing that kind of radical transformation in our own lives is probably the best way that we can “prepare the way of the Lord and make his paths straight” this Advent. To put it in the words of the prophet Micah, we must “Do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God.” As we wonder what gifts we might give to our loved ones this Christmas, may we offer to one another and to all we encounter lives transformed and made new by the love of God.

ⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, Advent 2 commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10 by Paul Simpson Duke.

ⁱⁱ Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1, Advent 2 commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10 by Stacey Simpson Duke.