



*A Lesson from a Stump*

*Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12*

*2nd Sunday in Advent ~ December 8th, 2019*

*First Federated Church of Peoria, Illinois*

*The Rev. Dr. Forrest Krummel, Jr.*

*Text: "Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves,  
"We have Abraham as our ancestor'" (Matthew 3: 8)*

I think that stumps are fascinating things. We've cut several down in the flower beds of our yard. We even had a few ground "out". The interesting thing about stumps is that just when you think that they are dead, just when you think that they are gone, a shoot pops up through the ground.

In our reading from Isaiah we hear the prophet's words, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." (11:1) The old prophet used the image of a stump to describe what God will do and is doing.

Through entangling alliances the southern kingdom of Judah became a vassal of Assyria while Israel was incrementally absorbed into the Assyrian kingdom. In the midst of this reality, Isaiah spoke of a God-given vision of a shoot growing out of the "stump of Jesse." Perhaps, like you, I had to ask, "Who is Jesse?"

Jesse was the grandson of Boaz and Ruth and the father of King David. He was a farmer and sheep breeder in and around Bethlehem.

So, a new ruler would come from "Jesse's stump." This ruler would be unlike any other ruler who had come before for:

the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the Spirit of Wisdom and Understanding,  
the Spirit of Counsel and might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge of and fear of the Lord.

Generations passed. Finally there came a man called "John". He wore clothing made of camel's hair and had a leather belt around his waist. He lived simply, off the land, eating locusts and wild honey. He spoke a message of repentance for the Kingdom of Heaven, the King that the prophet Isaiah foresaw, was near. The green shoot from the long dead stump of Jesse was sprouting unnoticed..

People of all shapes and sizes and backgrounds from Jerusalem and Judea flocked to him. Before him they confessed their sin, their brokenness. He baptized them. Perhaps most surprising in Matthew's gospel story is that even the Pharisees and Sadduces came to John, too. But his word for them was harsh.

“You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee the wrath that is to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say, ‘We are Father Abraham’s son and daughters.’”

In other words, God is not impressed with pedigree or heritage. You are not bound by who you were for God promised “I will remember your sin no more”. (Hebrews 8:13, et al)

Jill Duffield recently wrote about something called “The Marshall Project”. The Marshall Project is about a well-known French artist who worked with prisoners and correctional officers in the California Correctional Institution in Tehachapi. (Ta-Hatch-a-pee) The prisoners create works of art including a massive mural on the roof of the prison.

Barrett Fadden, one of the incarcerated men involved said this, "As a direct result of (this) project ... I have seen men change their lives for the better, two of whom I am now sponsoring through the twelve-step program. I think the biggest misconception about people in prison is that we are somehow less than human, and beyond helping. But we are not worthless, we have value and we can change." (Jill Duffield, The Presbyterian Outlook, December, 2019)

She concluded her reflection with these words:

“People, all people, have value. They can change. Accountability assumes both these truths. John the Baptist demonstrates God's belief in both our value and our potential to be transformed for good. Advent invites us to confess, fully and without fear, knowing that repentance leads to merciful forgiveness with the coming of Jesus Christ.”

The message of John, Zechariah and Elizabeth's son, Mary and Jesus' kin is as true today as it was nearly 2000 years ago. Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near.

To God be the glory.

Amen.