

“A Sprout from Jesse’s Stump”
Isaiah 11:1-10
Second Sunday of Advent
December 9, 2007

If you have grown up in Omaha like me, then the Westroads probably holds a special place in your heart. The very first suit I ever picked out and bought all by myself was at Westroads (I was looking good, too!). I enjoyed numerous dates at the movie theater the mall used to house. My Uncle Jim used to dress the windows at one of the men’s stores on the lower level, and every time he was in town, I used to go watch him work. Once, before I had a chance to put on my snow tires, my old Dodge Dart got very stuck in the parking lot during a surprise late autumn snowstorm. And how many times have I walked its halls looking for the perfect Christmas gift? The Westroads is a place I remember well. It is an important part of my past. Every time I drive by it, the memories wash over me. But now everything has changed. How will any of us ever be able to look at that place in the same way?

I had this nice little sermon all worked out for today. The second Sunday of Advent is traditionally the day that we focus on John the Baptist and his role as the forerunner of the Messiah. This morning I was not only going to focus John, but also on Zechariah and Elizabeth, John’s parents, and how the announcement of the birth of their son not only shaped our understanding of his life, but also how it helps us to shape our own lives for the Messiah’s coming. The events of this past Wednesday, however, have changed all of that. They have left an indelible mark on our community. Four days later, the tragedy is still too enormous to comprehend. What does one say? What does one do? Where does one go for help in this terrible time? The Bible seems like the obvious choice, but where do we turn? Fortunately the lectionary gave us an answer. For those of you unfamiliar with the lectionary, it is simply a listing of four suggested texts for each Sunday of the year. Those who use it have their choice of any or all of the four. Not only did the lectionary suggest a gospel lesson for this week that would enable us to explore the lives of John and his parents, but it also offered a text that would enable us to explore the difficult times that often face the people of God. And it is to that text I think we

should turn. If you were here last week, then you heard me tell you a little bit about those times. I mentioned the various armies that were breathing down the neck of the tiny country of Judah, and how King Ahaz had put his people in a very perilous situation by making a very unwise choice. In the passages before this we read that Isaiah reminded the people that the times would get much worse before they got better. But beginning with this particular text, he promised them that those better times were coming. Despite the fact that Ahaz had forgotten God, God had not forgotten his people. Listen again to some of the words that Isaiah promised, this time from the translation known as The Message:

*A green shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his roots a budding Branch.
The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
the Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,
the Spirit that instills knowledge and the fear of God.*

These words from the 11th chapter began by offering the image of a stump. Now Webster defines a stump as “the part of a plant, especially a tree...remaining after the trunk is cut.” It is not the most enduring of images, yet this was how the people of Jerusalem perceived themselves at that particular time in history. Chopped down, broken off, and only a stump of their former selves. With the northern kingdom of Israel already toppled by the armies of Assyria and, as the result of Ahaz’ unwise decision, Judah now forced to pay a heavy tribute to avoid a similar fate, a stump may have been the most accurate and appropriate image to use. Splintered and separated, knock-over and dried out, the glory that once existed in the kingdom of Judah was gone, and the situation in which those people found themselves seemed absolutely hopeless.

Now I don’t know about you, but that seems to be a fairly apt description of the situation that most of the people of our community find themselves this morning. What happened on Wednesday has chopped down whatever it was we thought about our community and left nothing but a stump. We are not what we were just one week ago.

We never will be again. And all of this comes right in the middle of the Advent season, when we are supposed to be preparing ourselves for that time when we are to celebrate the coming of Christ. I don't know about you, but I am having a hard time celebrating. I don't know about you, but I don't feel very festive right now. And I have a feeling that it will be a long time before I feel that way again. I found some words the other day that, while they do not speak to this particular situation, do seem to express the mood that so many of us are feeling. Listen to what the author of those words has to say:

*What is there to celebrate
in the midst of affluence, if you are poor?
in the midst of family reunions, when you are alone?
in the midst of love, when you feel rejected?*

*What is there to celebrate
about the sparkling eyes of children
when you are trying to deal with the deep scars of your own childhood?
about the choruses of peace on earth
when you are haunted by rising military expenditures?
about preacher talk of "goodwill on earth"
when you have lost your job?¹*

And perhaps the citizens of Omaha should add to that poem, "*about the birth of a baby when so many adults have needlessly died?*" Just like always, these are difficult times. We find ourselves in the same emotional state as our spiritual ancestors found themselves. What is there to celebrate when the Assyrian army, the most efficient fighting force in the world, is camped out upon your northern border? What is there to celebrate when some hometown coward works out his personal problems by taking up an assault rifle and turning it upon innocent people? What is there to celebrate when the money has run out, when your health has turned bad, when this year's holiday table will sport its first empty chair? What is there to celebrate when the various circumstances of life make one feel like nothing more than a stump?

¹ Melvin E. Wheatley, Jr., Christmas Is For Celebrating, The Upper Room, Nashville, 1977, p. 19

What is there to celebrate? Well, Isaiah knew. In the latter part of the 8th century B.C., he stood in the midst of Jerusalem and proclaimed:

*A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of its roots.*

To a people who felt that they had been chopped down and cut off, to a nation that found its existence to be one of futility and despair, to a faith that found itself questioning whether or not it was worth it, the prophet Isaiah offered a vision of hope. The stump was not as dead as it appeared. Despite all outward appearances, Isaiah knew that life was still to be found. For you see, centuries earlier God had made a promise to David, Jesse's son. God pledged that there would always be one of David's descendants to lead God's people. And unlike those who had recently done so, this one would be different. Guided by the Spirit of God, this one would lead with wisdom and understanding, with counsel and might. Unlike those who had made unwise decisions in the past, the shoot that would spring from Jesse's stump would find his delight to be in the fear of the Lord. He would lead with righteousness and compassion. And when he did, "*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 will lead them.*" The 11th chapter of Isaiah gave a promise of hope to a people whose world seemed hopeless. It gave a promise of peace to a people who knew no peace. It gave a promise of life to a people whose present prospects seemed no better than that of a dried out stump.

On this second Sunday of Advent, Isaiah's words remind us that this same promise is also offered to us. While the situation of the residents of modern Omaha may be very different from the situation of the residents of ancient Jerusalem, the feelings and prospects of our lives, especially on this Sunday after last Wednesday, can be just as devastating. These have been days in which we have felt chopped down. Although only fourteen people felt the bullets of the shooter's rifle, every one of us has been affected. Everybody seems to know somebody who knew somebody whose lives have been

touched that awful tragedy. The way our city is set up, it is so hard for any of us to avoid passing the Westroads in our travels. How will we deal with the emotions that doing so will now bring? Despite the bright lights and glitter of the holidays that we see all about us, what we will all experience in the days and weeks and months to come will make it seem as if there is little hope. And that is why it is so important for us to listen to the words of the prophet Isaiah. For the promise he proclaimed is not only the message of this and every Advent season, but also the message that will help us to handle all that we must face.

For many years Ralph Sockman was the pastor at Christ Methodist Church, a very prominent congregation in the heart of New York City. One day the Sockman's only son, while home on a college break, fell to his death from their Park Avenue apartment. No complete or satisfactory explanation of the tragedy was ever given. To this day it is unclear whether it was an accident or a suicide. As you might imagine, the Sockmans struggled greatly to come to grips with their son's death. Even pastors and their families struggle, you know. A number of years after that horrible day, however, Dr. Sockman was able to write the following. I want you to listen to what he wrote and, as you do, see if you don't hear the words of Isaiah echoing in the background.

Speaking personally, may I say that during the last decade of my life, things have happened that I cannot explain, nor can I say that they were sent from God. When I read, "All things work together for good for them that love God," the only way I can understand this in my own case is after the analogy of a ship. There are parts of a ship which taken by themselves would sink. The engine would sink. The propeller would sink. But when the parts of a ship are built together they float. So it is with the events of my life. Some have been tragic. Some have been happy. But when they are all built together, they form a craft that floats. Aye, more, one I believe is going someplace. And I am comforted.²

² Ralph W. Sockman, The Higher Happiness, Nashville, Abingdon-Cokesbury, 1950, p. 47

Did you hear that? These are words written by one who understands the promise and the gift that the shoot that springs from Jesse's stump can bring. God's promise to the people of 8th century B.C. Jerusalem, as well as the promise to the people of 21th century A.D. Omaha is not one that shelters us from the storms of life. No. God's promise is the assurance that no matter how dead the circumstances may appear, no matter how hopeless the situation may seem, no matter how dry or cracked or worm-eaten the stump of our lives may look, the boat still floats because ours is a God of life. And because God is life, there is always hope. And where there is hope, there are people who understand that not even those deranged individuals who take assault rifles into shopping malls will ever have the last word.

"A green shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump." And our faith tells us that this shoot will grow to be one that can transform every human life, that because of the way that he lived and in spite of the way that he died, there is now nothing that will ever be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. And because that is so, even this Christmas can be celebrated. As the poet has said, we can celebrate:

*Not a world that has in it nothing but good,
but a world that is good,
while having so much in it that is bad;
Not a life that knows no darkness,
but a life in which even those who walk in darkness
have seen a great light;
Not a God who gives us everything we want,
but a God who gives us everything we have,
and offers us all we need, now and forever.³*

Sisters and brothers, in this difficult time for our city, the words of the creed ring true: "In life, in death, in life beyond death, God is with us. We are not alone. Thanks be to God. Amen.

³ Wheatley, op. cit., p. 22

