

## A Shoot Shall Come Out

Isaiah 11:1-10

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If the Bible is about anything, it's about hope. It's about believing God can bring life where there seems to be only death; blossoming where there seems to be only drought; a new day when it seems the time has run out. The Bible is about birth and re-birth, hope and wholeness. Over all the centuries, people of faith have encountered a God who keeps on planting even when the soil is depleted, who keeps on cheering for us even though the odds are stacked against us, who journeys toward Bethlehem even though the No Vacancy signs have been in all the windows for weeks.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” Just to give this passage from Isaiah a little historical context, Jesse was the father of many children including David who later made quite a name for himself. Israel, at that time, was oppressed by the Philistines. The Philistines would send out their army, rattle their sabers, and the Hebrews would shrink back waiting for God to come to the rescue. Among the Philistines was the giant, Goliath, who challenged anyone with courage to come forward to duke it out with him. So, it was a very dry, despairing time in Israel's history. You might say the people were feeling like a weathered, lifeless tree stump. Can you picture the stump? Fungus is growing around it. Insects have burrowed into it. Saw dust is scattered at its base. No sign of life whatsoever. Onto this bleak landscape comes David with his slingshot and his faith. David, Jesse's youngest son, becomes the light in their darkness.

As the Prophet Isaiah, living three hundred years after the time of Jesse and David, imagines a Messiah who will come to establish peace, a Messiah who will come to heal the broken-hearted, a Messiah who will come to right the injustices that have been allowed to persist. He conjures up this image of a shoot, a new growth pushing up through the stump of Jesse. Isaiah foretells someone in David's line, someone who will proclaim release to the captives, sight to the blind, and liberation to the oppressed, someone who will take on the Goliaths of the modern age. When this Messiah comes, it will be like no other time; a wolf and a lamb will lie down together without fear, without threatening violence. It will be like no other time; the cow and bear will graze together; the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp; and a little child shall lead.

When Isaiah proclaimed 'a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,' he was imagining someone in David's royal line, someone in the future who would have a tender heart, who would usher in that day of peace.

It's a fabulous image, a shoot pushing up out of a dry old stump. It's a harbinger of Christmas, a sign that God would be doing a new thing, breathing the breath of life into our souls in a new way. Isaiah imagined this shoot coming out of the stump of Jesse as a force of liberation in the world, a force of peace and reconciliation, a force the world had never before witnessed, a force greater than David's sling shot...the force of Christ's unconditional love.

From our Christian perspective, the shoot from Jesse's stump is the Christ child, the offspring of God.

As I went out to rake leaves a few Saturdays ago in my own front yard with the South Church youth group, I was startled by the new growth of the southern oak.

When our second child graduated from Elon College in North Carolina, we drove down to attend the commencement ceremony. That's when we discovered that Elon means 'oak tree' in the Hebrew language. Each graduate, crossing the stage, received a diploma, a handshake, and an oak sapling. Ever so carefully, we hauled all ten inches of Sam's oak tree to 70 Homestead Drive, determined to make it grow to its full potential.

It took less than a year to discover southern oaks don't thrive so well in northern soil. Oh, it limped along for a few years, seemed to die more than once. But each spring, a shoot would push up and replace the dead tree trunk. Last fall, I thought we'd reached the end. It was the sorriest looking excuse for a tree I'd ever seen.

But come this past May, here came that shoot from that old stump. I wish you could all see it. In fact, drive by this afternoon and take a look. Two shoots have come up from the stump and stand taller and straighter than in any of its previous attempts.

During these weeks of Advent, we ponder a God who won't go away, who keeps on being born into the world. We ponder a God who is born in Bethlehem of Judea, whose birth name is Jesus. We ponder a God who surveys the landscape in search of a community where an Incarnation is still needed, where the birth of hope is still waiting. During Advent, we carry this image of a shoot coming out of a stump. We carry it with us when we go to work each morning, when we drop off our kids at daycare, when we go off to a farmer's field to glean cabbages, when we come on Thursday nights to choir rehearsal, when we sit quietly alone pondering our retirement time.

“A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse.”

If Christmas is anything at all, it is the birth of hope; the birth of hope in every heart, in every family, in every nation. It is the hope that in every darkness a Light does shine. Amen.