



“Out of a Dead Stump”
Scripture – Isaiah 11:1-10
Sermon preached by Gregory Knox Jones
Sunday, December 4, 2016

Isaiah, prophet and poet, paints an ideal of what God yearns for the world to become – a second Garden of Eden.

His poetry is stirring because he paints a scene that tugs at our soul. Isaiah pictures a time when predator and prey cuddle together, and everyone eats grain instead of each other.

You may have heard Woody Allen’s quip on this passage. He said, “The lion will lie down with the lamb, but the lamb won’t get much sleep.” His cynicism is surely justified by current conditions in our world.

Isaiah spoke these words 2,500 years ago, but we have made only incremental progress toward his vision. Today wars rage in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Nigeria, and Cameroon. Terrorism, hate crimes, racism, homophobia, and xenophobia stalk our planet. Greed, theft, addiction, poverty, and mental illness spread their suffering with no sign of diminishing. Cancer, Alzheimer’s, and Zika menace millions.

The peaceable kingdom is nowhere in sight and it would be easy to brush off Isaiah’s vision as silly sentimentality. Yet, I cannot resign myself to “This is the way the world has always been and this is the way it will always be.”

It would have been an easy way out for Isaiah to adopt such thinking. He could have prophesied only darkness and gloom. He was living in a time when the kings of ancient Israel were corrupt and the mighty Assyrian army was crushing the people.

Isaiah’s time was so grim that some have labeled it the first Jewish holocaust. A colleague describes this brutal age, saying that the Assyrian army “came like a scorpion plague, devouring everything and everyone in its path. Over and over Isaiah’s people were ravaged. The cries of pain seldom ceased. Who could plant a field and have any hope that it would survive to the harvest? Who could bear a child with confidence that it would reach maturity?”¹

With despair seizing the entire population, Isaiah did not declare that the end was coming and that the people should flee. Instead, he said, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” Out of a dead stump, a green shoot will appear.

If you have ever seen the dead stump of a tree that has been cut down, and out of the deadness comes a sliver of life, you understand Isaiah’s metaphor. For people who have lived most of their lives in the city, the equivalent would be a blade of grass or a seedling poking up through a sidewalk.

Have you ever seen new life spring forth in a totally unexpected place?

I remember a woman who had been largely dependent on her husband. She relied on him to take care of the finances, to fix things in the house when they broke, and to make the major decisions. When he died, her friends and family thought she would be so devastated that she would have to move in with one of them. Yet, she found a new source of strength and a new confidence. Rather than wilting, she found a new purpose in life.

Have you ever seen new life spring forth in a totally unexpected place?

I have known people with addictions that were killing them and destroying the lives of those around them. However, one day, after plummeting to the bottom, they reached for help to a power greater than themselves and they turned their life in a new direction.

Have you ever seen new life spring forth in a totally unexpected place?

Remember when our fiercest enemies were Germany and Japan? Because we did not seek revenge, but helped them rebuild, they are now among our strongest allies.

Isaiah's metaphor has an especially poignant meaning for Christians. Isaiah says, "A shoot shall come out from the stump of *Jesse*, and a *branch* shall grow out of his roots."

To understand the prophet we need to know who Jesse is. Jesse was none other than the father of King David. By Isaiah's time, 250 years later, David was hailed as the last great king. So Isaiah, surveying the pack of corrupt and inept kings that had driven their nation into the ground, has a vision of a future king – a new branch – who will be even greater than the legendary David. Isaiah says, "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." "Fear of the Lord" is a common phrase in the Jewish Scriptures that sometimes throws us. It does not mean being afraid of God, as if God's first desire is to see us squirm. "Fear of the Lord" would be better rendered as "being in awe of the might of God." It is taking God seriously.

Christians interpret these words of Isaiah's as an oblique reference to Jesus. Indeed, the gospels speak of God's Spirit descending like a dove and resting on him at his baptism. How will this king be different than the ones Isaiah and his people had to contend with?

Isaiah says, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth."

Righteousness is not self-righteousness, but rather is a synonym for justice. This one will not be fooled by appearances or by hearsay, he will judge according to what is right and fair and just. And when this new king reigns, he will usher in an entirely new creation. Violence and strife and killing will be no more.

But, Isaiah says it better with his vision of the peaceable kingdom. "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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 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."

This is the dream of God that we are called to embrace as our dream. It is an inspiring vision of the future with the power to lure us toward that future. It crucial to remember that we are not simply products of our past. We are also drawn by our vision of the future – who we can become and the kind of world we can create. If the vision of the future we hold is more of the same, then we will contribute to making it so. But if our vision of the world is of something new and better, we can help nudge the world in that direction.

Don't we long for a world where feeding ministries close their doors for lack of clients? Don't we long for a world where cities lay off police officers because there is so little crime? Don't we long for a world where children are hugged not hit, the homeless are housed, the mentally ill are healed and no more soldiers are sent to war?

In the long run, progress toward justice and peace is inevitable because God constantly urges people toward treating others with the same respect and dignity that we wish for ourselves. But in the short run, we must resist and overcome those people and powers that are motivated by greed, fear and egocentricity, because they invariably produce injustice, dissension, and strife.

Some have advocated pacifism based on this vision, but the cruelty and viciousness out there prevent me from taking that path. Evil must be resisted while we cling to the dream, because our task is to lay the groundwork, so that one day our descendants will be able to beat swords into plowshares.

Martin Luther King, Jr. said, "Human progress is neither automatic nor inevitable... Every step toward the goal of justice requires sacrifice, suffering, and struggle; the tireless exertions and passionate concern of dedicated individuals."

When we live with the notion that there is nothing we can do to heal even a small portion of the world, joy seeps out of our pores and hope is strangled. But when we hold God's dream before us and do what we can to live into it, we find our purpose and a goal worth pursuing.

Can you drop your cynicism? Can you drop your discouragement? God gives you the wisdom and the incentive and the tenacity to help create a better future. Use them!

NOTES

1. Stephen Montgomery, "Not Much But Enough for Me," December 5, 2010.

The Great Prayer of Thanksgiving (Communion) ~ Sudie Niesen Thompson

Eternal God, in the beginning, when darkness covered the face of the deep, you spoke and light sprang from darkness. You breathed life into every living thing and called humankind to love and serve you. But we turned away, letting the shadow of sin overwhelm us.

Ever faithful, you sent messengers to us, crying out in love and hope, "return!" We did not recognize them or listen to their words. So, turning to the angels, you said, "Watch!" as you sent Jesus to bring us home to you.

In him, your Word – that dwelt with you from the beginning of time – became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth.

In him, you showed the power of your love and the abundance of your mercy. In him you conquered death, and opened the way to eternal life.

As we gather at this table, we remember all you have done for us since the foundation of the world. With thanksgiving, we take this bread and this cup and proclaim the death and resurrection of our Lord. Pour out your Holy Spirit upon us; enter this space, that all things ordinary might be used for your extraordinary work.

As you fill us with this bread and cup, fill us with your hope, peace, joy, and love that we might go out to proclaim your good news to a weary world. We lift this prayer to you, in the name of the one who comes, and join our voices to offer the words he taught us: **Our Father ...**