

ST. JOHN'S EPISCOPAL CHURCH
COMPASS, PA

December 4, 2022 – ADVENT 2, YR. A

The Rev. Dr. Nina George-Hacker

Homily: *“Let Jesus Weed out the Bad—and Show You the WAY”**

Isaiah 11:1-10 (A prophecy of the coming Messiah, who brings peace)
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 (God's chosen one will do wondrous deeds)
Romans 15:4-13 (The coming Messiah will offer hope)
St. Matthew 3:1-12 (John the Baptist prophecies about Jesus' coming)

In today's reading from the prophet Isaiah, we encounter a strange image for the coming Messiah: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” We can picture this, because we've seen it: You chop down a tree in your yard, and all that's left is the stump. But then, at some point, a little shoot starts growing out of it.

Now, most people view this as an unwanted eyesore. Those little shoots growing out of stumps are called by the unflattering name of “suckers.” And you can find all sorts of remedies on the Internet for how to seal off a stump and prevent it from sprouting new life. After all, those ragged little branches growing out of a tree stump make it look sloppy and ugly.

So why does Isaiah use this imagery? Because he knew that Israel's enemies had tried every way they could think of to seal off the stump of Jesse that would ascend to King David's throne. They had inflicted upon Jesus' ancestors war, slavery, imprisonment, and forced starvation.

By the time Isaiah came along, Israel had not had a decent, righteous king for generations. Even so, the prophet believed there was still life stirring in that burned-out old stump.

Now, in this season of Advent, is when we see that tiny little shoot begin to sprout. It is so fragile! One wrong move and it could die. Too much or too little water, the improper amount of sunlight or wind, even a tiny insect, could come along and destroy it. It is totally defenseless.

Once again, this is a peculiar image for Jesus. After all, He is the new—and most glorious ever—King of Israel, yet He is depicted as a fragile branch growing out of an unsightly old stump. Not a very triumphant or powerful symbol. But that's what Advent is all about. It's about coming to terms with the profound awareness that God chose to visit Earth in just such a vulnerable state: as a defenseless human baby.

Neither an infant nor a frail shoot growing out of a stump will last long if not properly cared for. But God has revealed to Isaiah His eternal plan to grow this fragile branch of Israel's kingdom into the One who will bring salvation to the entire world. And when the Shoot of Jesse comes, there will be unprecedented peace and reconciliation in the lives of those whom He touches.

To illustrate this point, Isaiah (11:6, GNT) portrays reconciliation between creatures that are normally mortal enemies: “Wolves and sheep will live together in peace, and leopards will lie down with young goats. Calves and lion cubs will feed together, and little children will take care of them. Cows and bears will eat together, and their calves and cubs will lie down in peace.” When this kind of loving, peaceful coexistence prevails, we know the Kingdom of God has arrived.

When Jesus saves us and begins to live within us, He creates for us a secure space where it's safe for us to be vulnerable, to be truly ourselves. Sheltering us in His love, He makes a way for our spirits to stretch, grow, and start reaching out beyond ourselves.

The interesting thing about branches on trees is that they grow on the edge of the trunk. Very little of a tree's growth happens internally, down in the trunk, because new cells are produced right at its edge, where they build outward—fragile, and yet brave.

Advent challenges us to ask ourselves: Where are the edges in our lives that need to start growing? Are there parts of you that feel unfinished or fragile, such that you are afraid to branch out into the light? Are you seeking a new way forward but just can't see the path?

It may feel strange to be talking about the fragile, budding growth of new branches when we're just now settling into winter. But then, the new life and growth that Jesus brings do not always arrive in obvious places or seasons. We need to watch for rebirth and fresh shoots within ourselves and our neighbors, even in cold, frosty, forgotten, and inhospitable places—because that's where Jesus tends to show up!

Now when John the Baptizer comes along with his fiery message of “Believe the Good News, Repent, and be Baptized,” let's take a moment to remember how Isaiah's shoot got there. First, a tree had to be chopped down to its stump, in order for the new branch to grow up out of it. This is why John pronounces: “Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees.” God is going to cut down Israel's old ways, and He sends the prophet John to shock them and us out of our complacency. John calls us to chop down and dig out our old habits—the weeds of shame, selfishness, and stubbornness that have taken root in our souls. Advent is the time to do this winter weeding, with Jesus as the gardener.

John the Baptizer urges us to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” And when we chop down and throw away our worn-out condemnations of ourselves and others, we make room for the new branch, the Shoot of Jesse, to grow and flourish within us. We begin to walk the way of Christ, and to prepare a way for the Lord to come to us and others whom we encounter.

In this season of Advent, a time of expectation and possibility, the spirit of the coming Christ is seeking fertile ground in which to grow a new shoot out of our old stumps. With God's help, we will begin to see fresh life sprouting within us that will bear good fruit.¹

As you open yourself to this process, you may find that you begin to show forth God's grace in new and unexpected ways, as the way becomes clearer and clear. *Amen.*

* Adapt. N. George-Hacker, “Branch Out, Grow, and Make Good Fruit!” 8 December 2013, St. Christopher's Episcopal Church, Cobleskill NY. Used with permission.

¹ Adapt. Whitney Rice, “New Life Stirring in an Old Stump,” 8 December 2013, [EpiscopalChurch.org](https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/new-life-stirring-in-an-old-stump-advent-2-a-2013/) <<https://www.episcopalchurch.org/sermon/new-life-stirring-in-an-old-stump-advent-2-a-2013/>> 29 November 2022. Used with permission.