

**+ Isaiah 11:1-10 + Series: Who Is Coming? + Theme: The Shoot Is Growing! +
+ 2nd Sunday in Advent + 4 December 2016 +**

There's something sad about a stump. It's dead. It's lifeless. You might enjoy counting the rings to find out how old the tree was, but that's what's so sad about a stump. A stump is a tree that was rather than a tree that is. The tree was cut down for a reason. Perhaps it was sick or dying or rotting. Perhaps it had grown up in a place where something else needed to be. Perhaps it was cut down so as not to endanger a home. For those who planted the tree or have memories of that tree, a stump is sad to see because the glory's gone and what remains of the tree will eventually disappear.

It's depressing to see a stump, but when new life sprouts improbably out of that stump, it's not so depressing anymore. In fact, there might even be a little hope. For example, in the redwood forests of northern California, the trees there live for a thousand years and tower hundreds of feet above the forest floor. So when a mighty tree falls, it's a sad event. You don't find thousand-year-old trees out in the wild anymore. Yet in those ancient forests, you find something unusual. You find life—new trees sprouting up out of the old, decaying stumps. There's hope for the future as life returns to what once was dead. From the dead stump comes new life.

The ax was lopping off branches when the prophet Isaiah peered out towards the Assyrian army rampaging through the northern tribes of Israel. Soon they would be no more. Soon the ax would threaten the very root of the tree itself—the royal family line of David in Jerusalem.

How the mighty had fallen! Under King David and his wise son Solomon, the Lord had blessed the kingdom of Israel with great glory. The splendid temple of the Lord, built of cedar and covered in gold, shone brightly in the sun high atop a hill as a reminder of all that former glory.

...But the tree was dying. Wickedness and godlessness, hypocrisy and greed had rotted out the glorious tree of David's royal line. Time and again the kingdom of Israel had willfully plunged into the immoral worship of false gods and turned their back on the true God who had blessed them so richly. Loveless selfishness was a way of life in Israel, and judgment was coming.

The once-glorious tree would soon be reduced to a dead stump. Seven hundred years before the birth of Christ, the Lord raised up the mighty Assyrian Empire to serve as his ax to chop down the Northern Kingdom of ten Israelite tribes. Long ago they had abandoned the Lord and persecuted his prophets. So the Assyrians showed no mercy as they carried out God's judgment and scattered the people to the four winds. The Assyrians swiftly sliced their way right up to the gates of Jerusalem, and would've finished off the tree forever, if not for the mercy and power of God for his faithful people.

The Lord later felled the forest of Assyria and allowed Judah and Jerusalem to survive another 200 years, but even they fell away. So the Lord raised up another pagan empire—Babylon—to cut down the rest of the tree. Even the splendid temple was destroyed, as the royal tree came crashing down.

Only a dead, lifeless, rotting stump remained—a truly depressing picture for those who remembered the former days of glory and what the Lord had done to bless his people. They counted the rings of the years of grace God had given his people in Israel, but it would just be a stump—as lifeless as David's father Jesse and as insignificant as his hometown of Bethlehem. Yet the prophet begs us to take a closer look. Where you'd expect to see death and decay, he shows us life! ***“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”***

Unlike the felled forest of the Assyrian Empire, life would return from this stump. A King would come unlike all other mortal kings in human history. He would be the Lord's Anointed, God's Chosen One sent to save his people. Unlike an earthly king, this King would not come to establish an earthly kingdom. No, he would come to restore what had been lost in the hearts of the people. He would come to restore and to judge souls.

This King would bring new life because he would have the wisdom of the Lord. ***“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD—and he will delight in the fear of the LORD.”*** Anointed as God's Chosen One, he would come to ***“preach good news to the poor...and the day of vengeance of our God.”*** (Isaiah 61:1,2)

You see, this King would judge in a way no other king could or would. Earthly kings judge and make decisions by what they see and hear, but not this King. He would know hearts. He would know who needed him to judge ***“with righteousness”*** and ***“with justice”*** for their sake. He would know who desperately needed his mercy

and forgiveness. He would know who needed him to remove the guilt of their sins and grant them the holiness that only he as true God could give. He would cleanse hearts with repentance and turn them back to himself with forgiveness and grace.

Yet for the wicked, for a world opposed to him and his Word, for people worshiping themselves and the manmade gods of their hearts, judgment would come. **“He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.”** Against all who oppose him, the King of kings would go to war with victory guaranteed. **“Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.”** No one would be able to withstand this King who conquers the mighty and judges the wicked. On the Last Day, no one would be able to stand against him.

Who is this **“Branch”** who **“comes up from the stump of Jesse,”** who **“will bear fruit”** as a new tree grows from what once was dead, who will not be felled no matter how sharp the ax of his enemies? Who is this King who was foretold by the ancient prophet, who will rule with righteousness and justice, who will forgive and condemn, who will conquer and save? This King is Jesus and his coming fills our hearts with both dread and hope.

It fills our hearts with dread, because by nature, you and I are no more than rotting, dying trees that deserve only the swift judgment of the ax to destroy us forever. By nature, you and I worship ourselves and the false gods we set up in our hearts. By nature, we have nothing in ourselves to offer the holy God. By nature, we are hostile and opposed to the Word and will of the King of kings who comes to judge. By nature, we are loveless and hypocritical giving the appearance of generic morality and spiritual vitality, when by nature, we are rotten and dying. We lull ourselves into thinking that everything's great with God as we do our Christian duty on Sundays and forget about him the rest of the week, but judgment is coming swiftly and that fills our hearts with dread. The words of John the Baptizer terrify us, **“The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire.”** (Matthew 3:10)

Isaiah and John call us to **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is near,”** but how? (Matthew 3:2) If by nature, you are opposed to the coming King and rotting from the inside out, you cannot possibly turn yourself away from your sins and live. Repentance is not something that you can conjure up in your heart if you just feel sad enough or bad enough about your sins. That's nothing more than grief over your sins. The only One who can truly turn you from sin and from the lifeless rot of your sinful nature is the King who came to bring righteousness to the needy and justice **“for the poor of the earth.”**

Only the Messiah, only Christ, only Jesus can rescue you from your sins. Only Jesus, who came once in righteousness and faithfulness to contend for your soul, who comes in Word and Sacrament to save, and who will come in glory and grace, only he can keep you from becoming a dead stump. Only he can restore you to new life growing from him.

This Jesus grew up from **“the stump of Jesse”** to restore his Kingdom in our hearts, just as he did for those who lived 2,000 years ago. This Jesus grew up from **“the stump of Jesse”** and even allowed himself to be cut down with the ax of God's judgment to remove all our rot and death. Yet three days later, as a living, eternal Shoot, this Jesus sprouted from the cold, lifeless darkness of a tomb so we might live forever, so we might have peace and reconciliation with God through Christ's forgiveness.

In fact, that's exactly how the prophet describes the coming kingdom of the King of kings—a kingdom of true peace between God and humanity and creation itself. **“The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the hole of the cobra, and the young child put his hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”** Quite the unusual picture, but one so beautiful!

Isaiah is not describing “world peace” in the human sense, where all nations put down their weapons and all the animals set aside their food-chain differences to join hands and paws together in singing “Kumbaya.” That kind of peace will never exist as long as there is sin in our world. Sin has ruined any and every possibility of an outward peace among peoples and nations.

No, this is a picture of a return to paradise before sin. This is the result of the coming of that King of kings, whom Isaiah (9:6) also called **“the Prince of Peace.”** This is the result of the forgiveness and reconciliation and salvation that Christ brings to hearts lost and needy, left poor and abandoned by sin.

In this eternal kingdom of peace, there will be no more harm. There will be no more destruction. There will be no more death. There will be no more stumps. There will only be peace and healing and life coming from ***“the Root of Jesse,”*** the new life that grew up from what once was dead. ***“In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious.”***

With repentance worked by Christ himself and his Spirit in our hearts, we return to that place of glorious rest. With our hearts made alive by his glorious grace, we rally to ***“the Root of Jesse,”*** to the Tree that will never fall. He who once was dead is now alive, so we too will one day be raised to new life with our hope not dashed by a dead stump, but fulfilled in the living, eternal, glorious ***“Root of Jesse.”*** To him be glory forever. Amen.