

Sermon "Sages and Sprouts"

Scripture Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-13

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In Isaiah 11:1-10, the prophet brings words of hope to the Israelites several centuries before the birth of Christ. They had looked to their kings as anointed leaders since the reign of David, Jesse's son. Now they find themselves without a king and with a reduced nation after the surrounding superpowers had cut down their monarchy. "The stump of Jesse" is a metaphor of the people's despair. "The shoot" that will come forth from the remaining stump gives voice to hope for a new day grounded in the roots of Israel's past. A new age of royal government, international peace, and a reconciled, harmonious creation is envisioned. Listen to what the spirit is saying.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 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. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. 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; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

In our second scripture reading, Romans 15:4-13, Paul discusses unity, a unity threatened by different understandings of the proper response to the Gospel of Christ. Paul reminds Jewish and Gentile believers that our faith is rooted in the inclusive nature of God's love. Listen to God's holy word.

For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The title of the mediation: “Sages and Sprouts”

The text: A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. Isaiah 11:1

Let us pray: O Lord our God, in this Season of Advent as we prepare to welcome our Messiah, surprise us with new growth in our lives, growth that is rooted in our past and grounded in the hope for our future. Amen.

Today our Children’s Choir and Choristers present “Three Men on Camelback:” the story of the wise men’s journey to Bethlehem in search of a Messiah. Our three wise men are played by girls this year, according to director Dale Rogers. There has been some speculation over the years about how history might have changed if the sages or wise men who followed the star to the Christ child were women instead of men. Leading historians surmise:

They would have asked for directions and arrived on time, helped deliver the baby, cleaned the stable, made a casserole, and brought practical gifts.

The gifts presented by the sages who actually arrived perhaps a year following his birth offer insight into who Christ is. Gold is a symbol of kingship on earth, frankincense symbolizes deity, and myrrh (an embalming oil) foreshadows Christ’s death and affirms Christ’s mortality.

When God’s redeeming presence came into the world to partake in the human experience, the light of an Eastern Star announced the birth. This light of Epiphany, which led sages and strangers to the Christ child, is significant in that it welcomes all to partake in God’s inclusive and redeeming love among us.

T.S. Eliot, in his poem “Journey of the Magi” describes how the new perspective which sprouted within the Sages once they encountered Christ changed them forever. He writes:

*All this was a long time ago, I remember,
And I would do it again, but
were we all led this way for
birth or death? This was a birth, certainly,
We had evidence and no doubt,
I had seen birth and death,
but had thought they were different, this birth was
hard and bitter agony for us, like death, our death, we returned to our places, these kingdoms,
But no longer at ease here, in the old dispensation,
with an alien people clutching their gods.*

About the same time the sages took their journey, the Roman statesman Seneca wrote:
Throughout the whole of life one must continue to learn to live and what will amaze you even more, throughout life one must learn to die.

We don’t experience sprouts of wisdom and new understandings of ourselves and life without letting previously held beliefs die.

According to Isaiah, the transformation from a culture of fear to a world at peace begins with a stump. Out of something that appears finished, lifeless, left behind, comes the sign of new life—a green sprig, a sprout. This is how hope gets its start—it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place. We might ask ourselves, where are the stumps in our lives; where do we feel cut off, left behind? How might God be nurturing the growth of something new and good from our old dreams, illusions and assumptions? (*Paraphrase, Feasting on the Word, Year A, Volume 1, pg. 28.*)

Isaiah offered hope to a devastated people who had been cut off in a time of exile. Isaiah believed they were “cut down” by the Assyrians because they had forgotten the poor and oppressed among them. Their roots no longer sipped from the refreshing streams of Yahweh’s kindness and justice. They had forgotten what the Lord required of them “to seek justice, to love kindness and to walk humbly with their God.”

“The new shoot,” the sprout that grows out of the “stump of Jesse” is possible because of the deep roots of Israel’s faith tradition. The One who will save the people will reflect the character of God and lead with justice and compassion. We will recognize the fulfillment of the kingdom of God in the harmony that is reflected in the world. *“The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid... and a little child shall lead them.”* (pause)

As Christians, we understand the “little child” in Isaiah eleven to allude to the Christ child with Jesus as the “new branch from Jesse.” In Jesus’ ministry we see the spirit of wisdom and understanding as well as decisions of equity and compassion for the meek and the poor. The Evergreen tree stands in our midst each advent to remind us of the undying love of a child who was willing to lead even unto death on a cross, an uprooted tree. In this is the mystery of God’s love, which grafted the gentile world into the faith tradition of the Jewish world, making us brothers and sisters through *“a new branch that grew out of the root of Jesse.”*

In Paul’s letter to the Church of Rome, we are reminded of how difficult it was to do this grafting. The disunity among the Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ was threatening the survival of the new branch. Paul believed any attempt to impose the traditions of the old root on the new shoot would sever its growth and the unity of first century believers. He encourages them not only to live together but also to welcome people with different perspectives and yet who share a common purpose, affection and reverence.

During this season of Advent, even as the angels are preparing to proclaim the good news, we are mindful that we live in a world that does not reflect the vision of peace the Messiah would bring. We pray for peace and for those whose lives are being uprooted and cut off by ongoing political and religious conflict.

As people of faith, may we reflect the character of the child who came to lead us. May we become more rooted in the compassion and justice of the Sprout who redeemed us, who welcomed the sages, and who grafted us into the tree of life.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”
Amen.