

Westminster Sermon - "The Tree of Life"

Scripture Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-10, Romans 15:4-9a, 12-13

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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 through the prophet Isaiah.

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 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. Amen.

In our second scripture reading, Romans 15:4-9a, 12-13, 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 Christ might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for Christ's mercy. As it is written "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles and sing praises to your name;" and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in this One 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. Amen.

The title of the sermon: “The Tree of Life”

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, teach us your ways of peace and harmony, which are rooted in our past and grounded in the hope for our future. Amen.

In ancient Israel those who trusted in Yahweh were compared to a tree. As Jeremiah writes *“Blessed are those whose trust is the Lord. They shall be like a tree planted by water, sending out its roots by the streams. It shall not fear when heat comes, and its leaves shall stay green; in the year of drought, it is not anxious, and it does not cease to bear fruit.”* The ancient Hebrew believed a life grounded in faith would thrive and endure even during difficult times.

And so, the metaphor of the stump is devastating. Isaiah believed Judah was defeated or “cut down” by the Babylonians because they had forgotten the poor and oppressed among them. Their roots no longer reached 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.”

Isaiah offers hope to a devastated people who have been cut off from the past in a time of exile. “A new shoot” will grow out of the “stump of Jesse.” God will be faithful, and people of faith will once again be “like a tree.” The one who will save the people will reflect the character of Yahweh 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, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.”*

As Christians, we understand the “little child” in Isaiah eleven to be the Christ child and Jesus to be 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 is to do this grafting. The disunity among the Jewish and Gentile followers of Christ was threatening the survival of the new branch. Paul appeals to the teachings of the Hebrew Scripture and calls for harmony. This does not mean the sameness of thinking and doing according to Paul who encouraged different voices within the community.

Paul believed any attempt to impose the uniformity of the old root on the new shoot would sever its growth and the unity of first century believers, a diverse group to say the least. Paul warns against setting one’s own understanding of the proper response to the gospel as the norm against which to judge all other responses. Not only does this reduce life to one pitch—to a monotone, but also Paul rightly sees the danger of this kind of self-righteousness as bordering on

self-idolatry. Setting up something other than God as God. In this case, oneself, one's own point of view or one's own definition of right and wrong.

Paul calls the first century believers to a new way of life, which would reflect the strength of the faith tradition in which the character of Christ is rooted. Paul redefines strength in his call for harmony. Strength is not insisting on one's own way but being so rooted in oneself and relationship to God that living alongside those who are different is not threatening. Paul understands strength not unlike the prophet Isaiah portrayed it in the vision of what is to come when God's rule is complete.

The One who rules in righteousness is the one who understands the other's perspective, who listens with compassion, wisdom, and respect, and who identifies with the weak and the vulnerable. In this is true harmony, according to Isaiah. The strong no longer need to devour the weak and can live side by side. This is the peace and wholeness of shalom. This is the spirit and strength of Yahweh –the God of Jesus, the God of Jesse, and the God in whom our faith is grounded.

As we reflect on the root of Jesse following the inspiring gift of our children's voices this morning, I am reminded of a series of bronze sculptures created by my mother-in-law, Ann Feeley Kieffer.

Ann captured the essence of being grounded in the art form of a woman whose body grows out of an elaborate root system. One of these sculptures entitled "The Tree of Life" embodies a woman whose arms are wrapped around two small children all of whom are supported by a strong and solid network of roots at their base. These subtle roots, which might also appear as pleats in her graceful dress, add to the mystery of the relationship between a firm foundation and a compassionate life of strength.

Ann donated this sculpture to the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society of America over two decades ago and for several years a bronze addition was awarded annually to those who provide social, emotional, and spiritual support to young patients struggling for their lives.

As people of faith preparing our hearts for the birth of the Christ Child, may our roots be strong, our voices blend in harmony, and our spirits rejoice as we grow in the compassion and justice of the One who gave us life 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 Christ's roots."
Amen.