

“From the stump will come a shoot”
Isaiah 11:1-10
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Introduction

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree.” This German Christmas carol has one kind of tree in mind, with ornaments, lights, and family traditions. But today’s scripture passages have another kind of tree in mind. The stump that is found after Paul Bunyan comes to town, or after a big wind. It is true that we Christians look through the lens of Jesus when we read the OT, but just for today, do not rush to Jesus. Try to look at today’s scripture with the lens of the OT community of faith, who does not yet know Jesus.

Isaiah 11:1-10

We all want a peaceable kingdom

Chapter 11 in Isaiah is one of the most beloved and awe-inspiring in all of scripture. Vivid and striking images. The oldest of enemy pairs: wolf-lamb, leopard-kid, calf-lion, cow-bear, lion-ox, become good friends. Like watching Wild Kingdom, with a radical and unexpected twist: Prey and predator are at peace. We thought it not possible, but the wind has blown in newness. In the midst of the transformed newness, three times a child is mentioned: “little child,” “nursing

child,” and “weaned child.” All those animals in the upstairs nursery. A new innocence in which trust, gentleness, and friendship are possible.

Try to imagine a world in which the wolf and the lamb will share the same stall. The leopard and the baby goat will sleep together. A little child will put halters on a lion and a calf and lead them around. The lion will eat straw like the oxen. A little child will reach down into a cobra’s den and not be harmed.

That’s what the world will be like one day, according to Isaiah the prophet. At some future time the earth will be as full of the knowledge of the Lord as the oceans are with water; then no creature shall harm any other creature in all of God’s earth. The Wild Kingdom will become the Peaceable kingdom. And a little child shall lead them.

But for now we seem bent on destruction. A recent magazine article put together this incredible statistic: since the beginning of recorded history, the entire world has been at peace less than eight percent of the time! In their study, the journal discovered that of 3540 years of recorded history, only 286 years saw peace. In that time more than 8000 peace treaties were made--and broken.

How and when will the prophecy of Isaiah become a reality? Remember, scripture does not say that Isaiah’s golden age will come through the achievements of people.

We sadly realize that until God’s peaceable kingdom comes, there will be always be terrorists and politicians greedy for power. Yes, it helps to have a United Nations. Yes it helps to have a nuclear non-proliferation treaty. Yes it

helps to realize that where justice reigns so does peace. But there will be no cessation of all war, no golden age of peace throughout all the earth, until God's peaceable kingdom comes. It is said in scripture that if we want peace we must work for justice. But it is difficult to achieve justice when we are not global leaders

In the meantime what are we do to? Sit around and wait for Jesus to return in glory? Oh no, we have work to do. What work can we do? We are not global politicians. We are not powerful rulers. So what can WE do? We can reconcile the wolf and the lamb inside us.

There is a tiger within you and me that wants to snarl at people on the other side of the political or ideological fence. There is a wolf within us that re-opens old wounds and past failures even within our own households, just to make sure that even those nearest to us know we haven't forgotten their failures; maybe forgiven, but not forgotten. There is a cobra within us that lies in wait for people who are different from us, so that we can catch them fulfilling our prejudices about them. There is a bear within us that gives other people only one chance to disappoint us; and if they do, we reject them forever.

But you say, "Wait a minute. Look at all the beautiful capabilities of human beings. We rebuilt Europe with the Marshall Plan. We have a United Nations, a Church throughout the world, and the Red Cross, and doctors without borders." That's right. Humankind is more than a beast, but not an angel. Both wolf and lamb are within us. What a bundle of contrasts we are! We can say with irony more than admiration, "What a piece of work is man and woman!" One writer has described all of us with these words: "Within my earthly temple there's a crowd;

There's one of us that's humble, one that's proud, There's one that's broken-hearted for his sins, There's one that unrepentant sits and grins." What are we to do with ourselves, with this bundle of contradictions, with this combination of wolf and lamb? And how do we get from where we are now to God's peaceable kingdom?

Only through yielding ourselves to God can we be fundamentally changed. When we are sorry for hurting others, and pledge to change our ways, God's Spirit begins to restrain the beast within us and to unleash God's peaceable kingdom. But by ourselves we cannot restrain the beast within us. We need someone to lead us to God. To lead us to God's peaceable kingdom. We need a leader.

The ideal leader

And Isaiah tells us about the ideal leader. Isaiah tells us the ideal leader will be recognized by all, Democrats and Republicans alike. Christians and Jews and Muslims and Hindus. All will recognize the ideal leader as full of wisdom and understanding. One who gives direction to and builds strength in all. Who instills knowledge and awe of God. This leader will not judge by appearances. Won't decide on hearsay. Will deliver justice to the poor and the oppressed.

For the ideal leader is endowed with God's Spirit. God's life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending Spirit. A Spirit, a breath, a wind that is irresistible and beyond human control, management, or predictability.

There were no such earthly rulers in Isaiah's day. And there continue to be no such rulers in our day, 2700 years later.

So from where, you might ask, is this leader endowed with God's Spirit, going to come? Today's scripture tells us.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse

God is not the Paul Bunyan that Isaiah's contemporaries made him out to be. Yes the Chaldeans, the Babylonians, chopped the tree of Israel to the ground, but it was the misguided leaders of the Chaldeans bearing the ax, not God. God did not use the Chaldeans to punish or instruct the children of Israel. God does not work that way. Instead, God is with the children of Israel in their tragic devastation. And God is with us when WE are in pain. Even so, from the stump of devastation shall come a shoot. From the stump of Israel, from the stump of Jesse, David's father, shall come a new leader. And the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, of counsel and might, of knowledge and awe.

This shoot doesn't spring up out of a carefully prepared, plowed and furrowed field. Its source for germination is the decaying stump of an old, once-powerful name. Jesse, the father of David, was the father of the entire line of the Davidic monarchy. Jesse gave life to a king, who in turn gave life to the greatest age of power and influence in Israel's history.

A little green shoot arising from a stump is a sign of hope where at first there seems no life. This stump speaks of despair and resignation. But this is a stump with roots. And we have an intrusion of good news. A little green shoot comes out of the stump, and on it and through it blows the wind of God's Spirit.

Roots, stumps, spindly green shoots, tender new branches - none of these images are big, flashy, or impressive in any worldly way. They are instead small, simple signs of life and hope and the divine presence in the midst of the people.

The Advent season is the time of the year to Christmasize your life. To Christmasize your life means to pay attention to the small voice, the small growth, the small crack, the small table, the small talk, the small town (like Bethlehem), the small change, the small children . . . "and a little child shall lead them." To Christmasize your life means to live in the light of Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who, where one small voice rallies an entire village. To Christmasize your life means to recognize the importance of unimportance. To Christmasize your life means to start small, to pay attention to those things that are smaller than life, to sweat the small stuff. To Christmasize your life means to honor the fact that big things don't become big, only small things become big.

Conclusion

A little child shall lead us. During Advent, we anticipate the coming of that child. That child who shall lead us to the peaceable kingdom. A little child shall lead us, the wolf and the lamb alike.

Glory be to God, Hallelujah, and all God's children say. ...