

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 8, 2013
Advent 2
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-8
Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

I have been intrigued this week by the images the prophet Isaiah uses in our Old Testament lesson. Images of a peaceable kingdom where predators and their prey live side by side, and babies play unharmed near poisonous snakes and scorpions.

But when I look at the world I inhabit, I tend to agree with filmmaker Woody Allen's interpretation of these verses. He said: "The wolf shall lie down with the lamb – but the lamb won't get much sleep."

In this season that one song lauds as "the happiest time of the year," it can be easy to lose sight of the fact that for many, the season is anything but happy. Perhaps one reason the apostle Paul prays for the church at Rome, praying that they might overflow with hope through the Holy Spirit, is because it is so easy to *lose* hope.

Life, and circumstances, can sometimes tumble down upon us and rob us of hope. In this wonderful season, people are still losing their jobs, suffering financial setbacks, hearing a doctor tell them that the news is not good.

In this happy season, people who've just lost a loved one are wondering what the future will bring. In this happy season, some children in the Treasure Valley will go to bed hungry tonight, and others will go to bed with bruises on their bodies, terrified of what pain tomorrow may bring.

In this happy season, some families are so torn by relational strife and conflict that they wonder if reconciliation will ever be possible.

In the movie *The Shawshank Redemption*, Tim Robbins' character says to Morgan Freeman: "Hope is a good thing, and no good thing ever dies."

That may be true. But for many folks in this season, hope is on life support. Hope is hanging on by the thinnest of threads.

Is it possible that Isaiah may have anything to say to people like this? To people like us?

Interestingly enough, the people to whom Isaiah writes were in some ways very much like us. In fact, their hope was on life support also. Here's why.

After the formation of the monarchy in the Old Testament, the children of Israel later split into two kingdoms, Israel (the Northern Kingdom) and Judah (the Southern kingdom). By the time God calls Isaiah to his ministry, the Northern kingdom has gone into full blown rebellion against God, and the Southern kingdom (Judah) is not far behind.

Assyria – the great world power on the stage at the time – is about to sweep down and bring the Northern kingdom (Israel) to an end. Isaiah warns Judah to repent and trust in God, or it will suffer the same fate. Judah’s king, Ahaz, doesn’t listen.

So Isaiah brings this message. Assyria was known for importing huge cedar trees from Lebanon. And Isaiah tells the people of Israel and Judah that a massive “deforestation” project is coming. The Assyrian army will invade, they will rape, pillage, plunder, and destroy all cities and their inhabitants. The people will be taken captive and thrown into exile. And Judah, with its leaders descended from King David, will be cut down, reduced to a bloody stump.

This is not a message that engenders hope.

But then we arrive at our text this morning, where Isaiah says these words: “A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse’s stump, from his roots a budding branch” (*The Message*).

Sometimes even stumps can grow in nature. In a similar way, says Isaiah, *a new David will arise*, anointed with God’s Spirit, who will defend the poor and exploited, who will be clothed with righteousness and truth.

Have you ever seen something growing where it has no business growing? When my friend Dirk and I were driving our belongings to Idaho in a U-Haul truck, I remember driving along Interstate 80 in Wyoming. We had passed through

Cheyenne and were heading West toward Laramie, when I noticed a huge granite boulder in the center space between the eastbound freeway and the westbound freeway. I looked again, and could not believe my eyes. There, emerging from middle of that granite boulder, was a small, twisted, limber Pine tree.

A minister who serves a church in New York City was walking to her church a few weeks ago in the concrete jungle that is upper Manhattan, and as she walked she happened to look down, and there, poking up through the concrete, was a tiny green shoot about the size of her finger.

Isaiah says, “from the stump of destruction and despair, a new shoot can emerge.” From the stump of utter discouragement, hope can be resuscitated. Out of the darkest, most painful circumstances, new life can come forth.

I read a story this week about a musician who was performing with a friend at a Starbucks coffee shop at 51st Street and Broadway in New York City. It was a cold November day. The musician continues the story:

...For a musician, it's the most lucrative Starbucks in the world, I'm told, and consequently, the tips can be substantial if you play your tunes right. Apparently, we were striking all the right chords that night, because our basket was almost overflowing. It was a fun, low-pressure gig. I was playing keyboard and singing backup for my friend who also added rhythm with an arsenal of percussion instruments.

...During our rendition of one song, I noticed a lady sitting in one of the lounge chairs across from me. She was swaying to the beat and singing along. After the tune was over, she approached me and said, "I apologize for singing along on that song. Did it bother you?"

“No,” I replied. “We love it when the audience joins in. Would you like to sing up front on the next selection?”

To my delight, she accepted my invitation. “You choose the song,” I said. “What are you in the mood to sing?”

“Well, do you know any hymns?”

Hymns? (I thought). This woman didn’t know who she was dealing with. I cut my teeth on hymns. Before I was even born, I was going to church. I gave my guest singer a knowing look, and said: “name one.”

“Oh, I don’t know,” she said. “There are so many good ones. You pick one.”

“Okay,” I replied. “How about ‘His Eye is on the Sparrow’?”

My new friend grew silent, her eyes looking down. Then she fixed her gaze on mine again and said, “Yeah, let’s do that one.” She put down her purse, straightened her jacket, and faced the center of the shop. With my two bar setup, she began to sing:

‘Why should I be discouraged? Why should the shadows come?’

The audience of coffee drinkers was transfixed. Even the gurgling noises of the cappuccino machine ceased as the employees stopped what they were doing to listen. The song rose to its conclusion:

‘I sing because I’m happy, I sing because I’m free; for His eye is on the sparrow, and I know He watches me.’

When the last note was sung, the applause rose to a deafening roar that would have rivaled a sold-out crowd at Carnegie Hall. Embarrassed, the woman tried to shout over the din, “Y’all go back to your coffee. I didn’t come here to do a concert. I just came in for a cup of coffee, like all of you.”

But the ovation continued.

I embraced my new friend. “You, my dear, have made my whole year! That was beautiful!”

“Well, it’s funny that you picked that particular hymn,” she said.

“Why is that?”

“Well”...she hesitated again. “That was my daughter’s favorite song.”

“Really!” I exclaimed.

“Yes,” she said. And then she grabbed my hands. “She was sixteen. She died of a brain tumor last week.”

I said the first thing through my stunned silence. “Are you going to be ok?”

She smiled through tear-filled eyes and squeezed my hands. “I’m gonna be okay. I’ve just got to keep trusting the Lord and singing His songs.” Then she picked up her bag, and she was gone.

When life brings you to the place where you are sitting on the stump of utter despair, it's hard to imagine that anything can grow from that. At such times, and especially during Advent, God's Word comes to all of those who have ever sat on the stump, or who sit there now. It says to us: "a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, growing up like a young plant, like a root out of dry ground. He will have no form or majesty, that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him." (Is. 53:2)

And indeed, this tender shoot did come forth. Fragile, yet tenacious and stubborn. It grew like a plant out of dry ground. And in the end it pushed back a stone from a rock-hard tomb.

On this second Sunday of Advent, I have a message for all of those who find themselves sitting on the stump. For those who only see through their tears right now, those whose hope is fragile and on life-support, I offer you this little song:

*Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,
God's chosen One, Immanuel, draws near.*

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.