

The Shoot of Jesse

By: Stephanie Doeschot

December 11, 2019. Pastor Stephanie's sermon in this Advent evening service is about the shoot of Jesse from Isaiah 11, and how God is bringing new possibilities all around us.

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Advent is a time of taking stock of reality, and it's a time of promise. That's quite a profound combination. Usually when we take stock of reality, we realize that we have a lot of work ahead of us. It might be that our cholesterol or triglyceride numbers need to improve, or our financial picture needs to be turned around, or maybe a reality check reveals a relational difficulty which will require much more time and attention than previously. We hold promise for ourselves in believing that with enough effort, we can turn things around. But sometimes even with extraordinary effort, or with loss or brokenness, there is no fixing of a broken heart or a discouraged spirit on the horizon.

Now in the chapters prior to the reading that I read tonight, the prophet Isaiah has been telling the people that difficult circumstances will be their reality. The tallest trees, Isaiah says, will be cut down, and the lofty will be made low. There will be no human effort that will be mighty enough to turn that situation around. So why then does Isaiah get to speak into Advent? Where's the hope? Where's the waiting for God to do something big to turn things around? Well, Isaiah does go on to say a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. From what looked hopeless and lifeless, God says, new life will emerge. In God's timing, and by the mercy of God, the people will see life arise from destruction.

Now, Phil and I have a hiking and photography trip planned in March, going to some of the most spectacular national parks in Arizona and Utah. If you've ever been anywhere where there are sheer walls of granite such as those present in Zion National Park, you've noticed with wonder how seedlings appear in the most unlikely places. You will find them in places where the environment seems most inhospitable. It's quite amazing that a seed that lodges in a narrow crevice could ever have enough soil in which to develop roots and to draw nourishment for growth. But it happens. In the same way, Isaiah tells us, out of the stumps seemingly given up as a lost cause, God brings forth life -- sometimes in very small, barely noticeable ways -- but life nonetheless. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, like a seedling pushing through rock toward the sunlight.

When I was growing up there was a sweet, elderly couple who lived around the corner from our home. Mrs. Bumgartz always had fresh cookies that she shared with the many, many kids in our neighborhood. And Mr. Bumgartz always had a smile as he walked past our house to join his friends for a cup of coffee and some lively conversation downtown. Then one day we learned that Mrs. Bumgartz had died. When Mr. Bumgartz ventured out of the house again after several weeks had passed, he would walk his familiar route past our house. But now his head was hanging down, the weight of his sorrow causing his shoulders to sag. His smile was gone. He did not even seem to notice us playing nearby anymore. He was like a barren stump, cut off from the life that he had known and had loved. Then, much later on, we started to notice that he would say a few words to us as he walked by while we were playing in our front yard. It seemed like an overnight change. But for him, it must have been painfully slow. Like a seedling pushing through rock toward sunlight, a shoot coming out from the stump of Jesse.

We often decide too soon when things can't grow. "Surely not there," we say about some things. "The

rock is too hard, the stump too dead." There are times when we assume whole groups of people cannot grow or thrive. Or the years of seeing cultural trends heading one direction can keep us from noticing when the tide begins to turn, bit by bit. But hope is nothing if not stubborn. All kinds of obstacles can be present, and yet something unexpected pushes up through the surface. A shoot breaks through the rock where you'd least expect it, and a renewed life appears in a broken-hearted old man.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I've sat there myself. Perhaps you have, too. You might be there just now, at that place where hope seems cut off, where loss and despair, or just resignation to things being the way they are with no relief, have perhaps deadened your heart.

God's Advent word, about a dead stump bringing forth a new shoot, comes to us. It's not a quick panacea, but it's a hopeful message. Even if it comes in a form we don't easily recognize, something small -- nearly imperceptible -- appears and grows. It's often sometime later that we recognize it as the work of God, bringing a hopeful situation out of a very tiny beginning. After all, the prototype shoot of Jesse of which Isaiah speaks, the promised Messiah, seemed to appear out of a very inhospitable situation, and grow without much fanfare or notice, until people looked back and saw him for who he really was. For he grew up before them, like a young plant. And like a root out of dry ground, he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.

Yes, a shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse, fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock hard tomb.

God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to notice where God's spirit is bringing new shoots of possibility all around us. Even when all we can see at times is a stump, God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us. "Look. Look over there. Look on the stump. Do you see that green shoot sprouting up?" Do we? Do we wait and wonder and look for God's presence in small and sometimes mysterious ways? Blessed are those who do look and see.

Amen.

*** Keywords ***

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