

SCRIPTURE'S STUMP SPEECH
Sermon, December 8, 2019
The Second Sunday of Advent
Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13

Every December in our homes we bring out the old boxes of Christmas ornaments. (*Actually, I haven't done so yet in my home, but I'm getting there ... my first Christmas as an empty nester, I'm a bit slow getting seasonal things done ... but I did get the wreaths up and the lights in the windows!*) We take these old boxes out of storage, open the lids, take out the contents, unwrap them, examine them, reminisce about the memories they inspire ... some of these old ornaments carry memories full of meaning that those outside the family probably would never fully understand or appreciate ... and we then place them in their accustomed spots around the home. In like manner, every Advent season in the household of faith we bring out the old "boxes" full of Christmas prophecies, the boxes filled with "ornaments" labeled Micah, Isaiah, Malachi, Hosea. One by one we unwrap those splendid prophecies like precious ornaments; we examine them, we reflect on their meaning, reminisce about the memories they inspire ... memories full of meaning that those outside the family of faith would never fully understand or appreciate ... and we sing them in the familiar hymns and carols of the season, we recite them in the readings, we enact them in the pageants of the Sunday School (*on a related note, thank you to all who supported the Sunday School's Christmas Pageant last night; we had a wonderful time and over fifty went out on the school bus and car caravan caroling to the homes of our shut-ins!*). The particular prophetic "ornament" we examine today is an ornament in the shape of a tree stump. It is the prophecy of Isaiah, originally spoken in about the 8th century B.C.

As you can see in the bulletin, the sermon title is "Scripture's Stump Speech." A stump speech is a speech during election season made many times by a politician who is traveling to different places during a campaign. Every election cycle, candidates are said to go "on the stump" – traveling from place to place making their stump speeches in front of live audiences. In the days before microphones, teleprompters and auditoriums filled with thousands, the most common way to be heard was for the candidate to stand on a tree stump. Stumps used to be all over the landscape, especially during colonial times. Tree stumps were used as the speakers' platforms, elevating the candidate so he could be seen and heard, so the word "stump" began to be used figuratively as the place where a political speech was made ... a speech where candidates seek to communicate their hopes and dreams and visions to the people.

Isaiah's prophecy in Chapter 11 is something of a stump speech, figuratively and literally. It's a message communicating hope and vision and lofty dreams, and it's a message whose very subject is a stump. The prophet is communicating God-inspired hopes and dreams and visions to the community of God's people, using the image of a stump ... the stump of Jesse.

Now, a stump is hardly an image that inspires. If anything, a stump is something of a bleak symbol, a symbol of fallen hope, of cut-off dreams, of lifelessness. A stump serves as a reminder of a past, perhaps even a glorious past, that no longer is. Once, a stump was a lofty tree that provided shelter, protection, food, shade, beauty ... and lots of leaves to rake every fall. Now it is just a lifeless stump taking up space, something to trip over in the back yard. Once, the stump stood tall as a symbol of life and strength and energy. Now, it just sort of squats there as a sad reminder ... a reminder of cut-down grandeur, fallen hopes, cut-off aspirations. A stump has no future. In time, it will only decay and disintegrate into the ground.

For the people of Isaiah in 8th century B.C. Israel, the "stump of Jesse" served as a graphic image for their current situation. David, son of Jesse, was Israel's greatest king. For centuries Israel had flourished under the grand dynasty of the house of Jesse. God had even promised David that one of his descendants would sit on his throne forever and ever. But now this great dynasty has been cut down. The Assyrian empire had swept over her, and David's family tree was cut off, cut down. The fulfillment of that divine promise looked impossible. Israel's situation seemed hopeless. The great leafy tree of David's dynasty faced extinction; in fact, Israel *herself* faced extinction. The hopes and dreams of all Israel's years are reduced to the image of a stump.

Imagine, then, the reaction of this defeated people when Isaiah comes along and speaks these astounding words: "*A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse, from his roots a branch will bear fruit!*" A fruitful shoot coming out of that stump? A new king emerging from the remains of David's devastated kingdom? That just doesn't seem at all impossible. But Isaiah the prophet has been given a divine vision of a future filled with hope ... that out of the

side of this apparently dead, lifeless stump, a fresh, fruitful branch shoots up. As Isaiah continues, this Branch grows up to become a mighty king who will be filled with the Spirit of the Lord, one who will delight in carrying out the Lord's good and perfect will. On Him will rest the spirit of wisdom and understanding; the spirit of counsel and power. This king will take care of the wicked, once and for all! Righteousness and faithfulness will be the belt around his entire administration, and all will be well! All the nations will rally to the branch of Jesse; all the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

Now, this isn't all going to happen at once. Think of the Old Testament prophets looking into the future as one looking from a mountain top. When you stand on the summit of a mountain, you can see other peaks in the distance; it's a glorious view, those peaks are vividly real, but it is hard to judge the distance and depths of the valleys in between. Believe me, I know this first hand ... more than a few times I underestimated such distances when hiking in the mountains which led to a few (mis)adventures! But, I digress. Biblical prophecy is like that; the prophet literally *peeks* ahead (*pun intended*); God allows the prophet to see the peaks of His fulfilled promises ahead. In the year of our Lord 2019, we are a lot further down that road of peaks and valleys into the glorious future Isaiah saw; some of Isaiah's foreseen mountaintop vistas are in our past, some are yet to come. We in the church have come to believe that the shoot from the stump of Jesse, the great King Isaiah describes, is our Lord Jesus Christ, whose birth we are about to celebrate; but we know that the complete fulfillment of this wonderful prophecy is still to come in the future, as we await His return as King of Kings and Lord of lords, and He will reign forever and ever.

In light of this prophecy, I've always thought it is a little ironic that most of us will have beautiful Christmas trees in our homes. I think Isaiah might say we are focused on the wrong part of the tree! Maybe we should have left the cut-down tree back at the Christmas tree farm and brought the stump home, and set that up in our living room and sit around singing, "*O Christmas Stump, O Christmas stump!*" I don't think that will ever catch on, but in light of Isaiah's prophecy, it would be a more appropriate symbol of this Advent season of hope and expectation ... not to mention being a whole lot easier to decorate and to clean up after!

But we know majestic trees don't grow out of dead stumps; demolished kingdoms just don't produce mighty kings. It would take a miracle of God to bring new life out of an old stump. It would take a miracle to bring new hope out of cut down hopes and dreams. And Isaiah would say, "**Right!**" This is where God's work always seems to begin, among the stumps of hopes that have fallen, dreams that have been cut down, stumps of human failure. God's work begins in a garden of Paradise stumped and spoiled by human rebellion. It begins again with a flood, with Noah and the animals bobbing atop the watery chaos of a cut-off, drowned creation. God's work begins with a childless couple like Abraham and Sarah, out of whose old stumped lives came Isaac, the child of promise. God's work begins with slaves cut off from freedom, making bricks under Pharaoh's whip in the hot Egyptian sun. God's work often begins where human hopes and dreams have been cut off and hewn down, where human efforts have failed. The good news is that God specializes in stumps, He delights in bringing hope and life from those stumped places in life marked by failure, collapse, or cut off dreams!

I think it's a safe bet to say that many of us here have stumps in our lives. Hopes and dreams that have been chopped down, cut off, hewn down before their time ... stumps caused by layoffs and losses of work, broken hearts, empty bank accounts, hopelessly overcharged credit cards, dead-end jobs, friends that moved away, loved ones who departed this life all too soon, kids with problems, parents with problems ... these are the stumps, the seemingly hopeless and lifeless and cut off stumps, that litter the backyards of our lives. Stumps resulting from the brutal hatchets of disease, death, divorce, depression, despair; people who find themselves in desperate situations and see no reason to hope. By the grace of God, fresh hope and new life can spring out of any stump; I know some of you here have experienced that first hand. As of today, I've been in this pulpit 23 years (*December 8, 1996 was my first Sunday as your pastor*), and over the years I've been privileged to see many of you recover from heavy blows (*and have been there myself*) ... you thought you would never have reason to hope again, you thought you would never know joy again, you would never love again ... but by the grace of God, you did!

This is not just the "stump speech" of the prophet Isaiah, this is the "stump speech" of all the Scriptures! God can and often does raise up new life where no one thinks it's possible, as so vividly demonstrated in Jesus Christ, the Branch from the stump of Jesse. We live in the Kingdom where stumps grow shoots and the dead shall rise. For where the Spirit of God is at work, life and hope can and will spring up ... and even flourish.

I close with Paul's words from Romans 15:12-13: *'Isaiah says, 'The Root of Jesse will spring up, One who will arise to rule over the nations; the Gentiles will hope in him. May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in him, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.'*