

SCRIPTURE'S "SHOOT"-ING STAR
Sermon, December 4, 2022
Second Sunday of Advent
Texts: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13

As mentioned during the Lighting of the Advent Wreath, today is the last Sunday of my 26th year as pastor here at Greenwood (*Thursday, December 8, 1996 was my first Sunday in the pulpit here; next Sunday begins my 27th year*). Six or seven times over those 26 years, usually on Christmas Eve, I've asked the children, "Where was the brightest star that first Christmas Eve?" Hands would eagerly shoot up and everyone thought they had the right answer. However, it was a bit of a trick question; biblically and figuratively speaking, the brightest star that night was not in the sky over Bethlehem; the brightest Star of the show was lying in the manger. The Bible speaks about a Star who "...shall come forth out of Jacob, a scepter shall rise over Israel (Numbers 2:17), One who will be known as the Morning Star (Rev. 22:16), the Dayspring from on High (Luke 1:78) the latter two terms used to denote the rising of the sun in the morning, dispelling the darkness of night. Malachi 4 also refers to this Star as the Sun of Righteousness rising with healing in His wings, as we sing in the second stanza of "Hark! the Herald Angels Sing": "Hail the heaven born Prince of Peace, Hail the Sun of Righteousness. Light and life to all he brings, risen with healing in his wings." In Revelation 22:16, we read: "I, Jesus, have sent my angel to give you this testimony for the churches. I am the Root and the Offspring of David, and the bright Morning Star." This Star is the Light of the world, the Messiah who will come to dispel the darkness of sin as the sun dispels the darkness of night, the One who will bring light and life to our souls.

That celestial star over Bethlehem had a secondary function, a God-appointed duty ... its purpose was to direct others to the true Star of the Show, the Morning Star, the Sun of Righteousness. As I would tell the children on those Christmas Eves past, God calls us all to be "stars" like that star over Bethlehem. That's our role, our duty, our calling ... to let our lights shine by our deeds, by our words, by our lives, by all we do ... as we try and direct others to the true Star.

Well, it struck me that in our reading from Isaiah this morning this Star is also described as a Shoot ... a Shoot that will arise from the stump of Jesse ... so, we might say we have a shoot-ing Star! Hence the (*admittedly corny*) sermon title. During a brief period in our world's history, this brilliant Light from heaven entered our "atmosphere" from above, so to speak ... the analogy breaks down; as you know, real shooting stars (*meteorites, actually, entering Earth's atmosphere*) are overcome by the darkness of this "world" as they are consumed by atmospheric friction; however, as John 1 tells us, this particular Shooting Star, this Light, was *not* overcome by the darkness.

I've mentioned when we've looked at this passage in years past that I like to think of Isaiah's prophecy in Chapter 11 as a stump speech, figuratively and literally. The prophet is on "the stump"¹ communicating God-inspired hopes and dreams and visions to the community of God's people, while 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 providing shelter, protection, food, shade, beauty (*and lots of leaves to rake every fall*). Once, the stump stood tall as a symbol of life and strength and energy. Now, it just sort of squats there as a sad and lifeless 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 the fulfillment of that promise looked impossible. This great dynasty has been "chopped down." The Assyrians have swept over Israel, and Jesse's family tree was cut off, cut down. Israel's situation seemed hopeless. The great leafy tree of David's dynasty faced extinction; Israel *herself* faced extinction. The hopes and dreams of all Israel's years are now 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

¹ 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.

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 this apparently dead, lifeless stump of a dynasty, 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. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, nor will he "decide by what his ears hear" ... in other words, this is a king who will not be open to the abuse of personal power, nor will he be swayed by the polls of the crowd or the special interests ... imagine that in a political leader! Righteousness and faithfulness will be the belt around his entire administration, and all will be well! All the nations will rally to this shoot from Jesse's stump; all the earth will be full of the knowledge of this Lord as the waters cover the sea.

(The following was edited out on the spot due to time constraints; I include it here) -- "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 2022, we are a lot further down that road of peaks and valleys into the glorious dream 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, Isaiah's dream of which the choir sang, is still to come in the future, as we await Jesus' return as King of Kings and Lord of lords, and He shall 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 \$tump!" 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. 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 who have experienced that first hand. Over the past quarter century I've been privileged to see many here 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!

You might call this 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 Shooting Star 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."*