

A Fresh Start

We are used to starting this morning's reading from Isaiah with the shoot coming out of the stump, but the metaphor really begins two verses earlier, with the image of a forest that God has clear-cut, taking an axe to everything, felling majestic trees, not a sapling left standing. I don't know if you have ever seen a forest tract that has been clear-cut. When it's freshly forested, it's one of the bleakest pictures I can think of, nothing but stumps where only a short time ago there were tall, healthy, beautiful trees. What was a thriving environment looks like a war zone. It looks like a place that is devoid of hope.

I suspect many of us have experienced times when you felt like your life was clear-cut with nothing left standing. Maybe it was when your spouse said, "I'm leaving", maybe it was the death of someone you loved – a parent, a sibling, a spouse, a child. Maybe it was when the job you had been in for years ended suddenly. Maybe it was the onset of a disease that meant everything had to change.

For some of us, the recent political situation has left us feeling as if we are standing on ground that is in the middle of being clear-cut, with values, things like justice and compassion for those who are hurting and forgotten, things we have always held dear as Americans as well as Christians being challenged and belittled and cut out from under us on a daily basis. We stand on devastated ground and look around us. Where can we find hope?

"A shoot shall come forth out of the stump of Jesse..." In the midst of devastation, life still finds a way. It happens in nature, as a seed takes root in a crack one would have thought was too small and too tight for anything to grow. It happens as a sprout pushes up through a sidewalk crack even in the middle of the city. It happens when a mighty redwood, the tallest of all trees, is cut down. The stump is left and rots away, but from the knuckles of the ancient roots, a circle of new trees grows.

In the Lord of the Rings, at the end of the story, when the One Ring has been destroyed and evil Sauron has been cast down, there is a fragile note of

hope for what the future may bring, but no real assurance that the new kingdom will grow. The white tree that symbolized the kingship of Gondor still stands, a dead bare trunk in the middle of the palace courtyard. Aragorn, the King, stands with Gandalf the White in the courtyard. "The tree in the court of the fountain is still withered and barren," he says. "When shall I see a sign that it will ever be otherwise?" "Turn your face from the green world and look where all seems barren and cold," says Gandalf. Aragorn turns and there on the edge of the stony slope, there in the wasteland, he sees a sapling of the White tree growing.

That's the way it happens, doesn't it? In the times when things seem most barren, when one is about to despair that new growth could possibly come, God brings a change and something new springs forth.

Preacher Barbara Lindblad tells about a neighbor she saw regularly at the newsstand in New York where she lives. After years of greeting him daily, his wife of forty-two years died, and it seemed as if his whole being changed. His bearing drooped, his head was bowed down, he seemed cut off. For weeks, she would greet him at the newsstand and get no response.

Then, suddenly, one morning before she could even get her greeting out, he spoke to her. "Good morning, Reverend, out to get the paper?" And then he walked back to her building with her, chatting all the way. What changed? She couldn't see. Perhaps the new life had been there, pushing its way to the surface for some time. But to her, suddenly, she saw it, as it pushed through the surface and into the light.

Some of you will remember that three years ago, this church was in a cut-off place. The vote to merge with Chambers church had narrowly failed. We had dreamed of a vision for our new church that seemed to be cut off before it could even come into being. I was still preaching both here and at Chambers that December, and I remember how tenuous any hope for a future seemed for both churches. It was a season of devastation, with only the tiniest beginning of

a new sprout of hope. Yet from that cut-off stump, a new church has grown. We have leaders from both congregations who were committed to the vision now gathered in to one church. We have a thriving ministry reaching out to the disability community in Our Community Cup. We have welcomed new friends into our church community so that those who have been away for a while who come back to visit are amazed at all the different faces. We are growing into our new name, becoming truly a vibrant Tree of Life.

That's how Jesus' story starts, with a voice crying in the wilderness, in a land and to some extent a time that seems devastated and without hope. Into that wilderness comes John the Baptist, calling people to repent, to change the way things are, to change the way they are, calling people to a fresh start, a new beginning. In that wilderness, from a cut-off stump, a new shoot begins to grow in Jesus of Nazareth. Hope begins to grow.

In these troubled times, it sometimes seems as if our hope is cut off – our hope for a better world, for a world where people would at least treat each other with decency if not with kindness, where justice and the rule of law would be respected and not flouted, where a concern for the common good might outweigh the constant push for personal gain.

Yet if we open our eyes we can see those signs of hope in nature, in our neighbors, in the church. The shoots are small, just now taking root, but the hope is there. And beyond that, there is the word of the prophet, the certainty of the work of God, For in that impossible kingdom that the prophet pictures, where the wolf lies down with the lamb and a little child leads them all, over and over one word is repeated: shall. It is not a remote possibility that the new shoot will grow, that God's kingdom will come. It is not a roll of the dice to see if it will happen or not. It is presented as a certainty, not because of anything we choose to do, but because God will do it, with our help.

My friend Ellie shared a memory of the property her parents bought in the Adirondacks in 1959 when she was just a little girl. It was a run-down cabin in the

midst of a clear-cut forest. She remembers the jumble of brush and branches everywhere on the ground, because the lumber men just took the big strong trunks and left the rest of the tree behind. Ellie told me about how every summer for years her father along with all the kids would work to clear that land, hauling and piling all the brush into burn piles, clearing a space so something new could grow. Then she described that same land as it is now, filled with strong trees, green and beautiful, a place of rest and peace.

I wonder if that isn't like the work God does among us. Out of devastation, years ago, a new shoot grew, Jesus of Nazareth, a person so different from anything that had been expected, a man from a town of Not-much-worth born into a family of not-much-importance, yet the son of God, Immanuel, God with us. In Jesus, we see a new kind of leader who gives us a new kind of hope. Isaiah describes that leader: "With righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth....Righteousness shall be the belt round his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins." Jesus started that growing work of God's kingdom, but it's not done yet. It is our work with his help to keep clearing the ground and making a place for something new to grow.

Yet the growth is not ours alone to bring. It is the power of God, God's desire for justice and peace and righteousness, God's love for us and for this world, that will bring the growth. And the growth shall take place. A shoot shall spring forth from the root of Jesse. And the earth shall be filled with the knowledge of God as the waters cover the sea. Amen.

