

Advent 2 – 2010 – Year A

TWO CHRISTMAS TREES

ISAIAH 11: 1-9

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse And a branch shall grow out of his roots

The Spirit of the Lord shall rest on him

The spirit of wisdom and understanding The spirit of counsel and might

The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord

He shall not judge by what his eyes see Or decide by what his ears hear

But with righteousness he shall judge the poor

And decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

He shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth

And with the breath of his lips he shall kill wickedness

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist

And faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

The calf and the lion and the fatling together À And a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together;

And the lion shall eat straw like the ox

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adders den

They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain

For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

As the waters cover the sea.

So....for a few years now I've been struggling with what to do about a Christmas tree. I used to say nothing but a real one because that's what I grew up with and it's nostalgic and it smells so nice...

Then moved to feeling....irresponsible and sort of cruel for killing something to celebrate life,but what are the alternatives? The artificial ones are....well....artificial. Do I feel any better about celebrating life with something fake?

My sister has experimented with real living ones in potswith disastrous results

And so for me, the inner conversation continues. And it's not an academic discussion either, it involves feelings, quite deep ones that somehow I can't explain or fully understand. It MATTERS to me what decision I make about this. Is there research, I wonder, about how the tree image is used in different cultures and religions – trees seem primal and universal somehow, and it's no wonder they appear everywhere people seek the truth.

Advent is a funny time like that. Getting ready for Christmas has a way of focusing the feelings – do you find that as well? Feelings that you can push down or ignore at other times of the year.

Sort of like when you've been to the dentist and then the freezing wears off. As the world outside freezes, the feelings inside thaw, and are more tender, sensitive. I'll try not to push the tooth metaphor, but earlier this week I said to someone that reading and listening to John the Baptizer is a bit like biting down on tinfoil. That jolt of pain when you're not expecting it.

ANYWAY...the texts for this time of year invite us tosink our teeth into life, as it were, pain and all.

In Isaiah, the image is of a tree. A stump, really. What's left of what was once a strong and healthy tree. And so here we are, coming up to Christmas and back to a discussion about trees. What to do about this one?

One personal story: In my settlement charge, there was a tree in the front yard at the manse. It was a beautiful old elegant maple. Kids climbed it, brides and grooms had their pictures taken under it, it turned so beautiful in the fall – it was lovely. I stayed at that church 9 years. And I gave my heart to them, and in all our years together it seemed as though that tree presided over our life together as a congregation. It was there that I found my feet as a minister, it was there that my husband died, it was there that I learned I could be ok alone. Then I moved.

The first time I went back to visit, what I found as I drove down the main street toward the manse.....where that tree used to be was a stump. Someone had cut it down. And I started to cry. It was as though all the feelings I thought I'd dealt with were focused on that tree...and now...it was a stump.

Trees have a way of getting to (I can't resist it) the root of things. Going deep. Seeking out what feeds and nourishes and causes growth.

Christmas trees.

Many faith traditions use a Jesse tree during Advent.

Trees.

As Isaiah was writing this, his country is at war. The Northern kingdom has fallen and the armies are on the march toward Jerusalem. We're told that the Assyrian army practiced a scorched earth policy.....so as he speaks or writes his prophesy, the forests are being destroyed

And so the trees literally and figuratively are stumps: the lovely forests of Israel (which are burning today even as we speak) the family trees of its people, some of them cut to the ground as their people died in the insanity of war

And the dynasty of David, the ruler that God had promised would always be on the throne of Israel – was no more. A stump.

The prophet sings this song of longing – remembering the days when there was peace and the country was strong and faithful (ok those days never really did exist but there HAD been good times – times of strength and laughter and faithfulness)

And now –

Isaiah uses a tree to express what's been lost

And close to the same time so does the author of Genesis, writing the story of creation

Something is wrong they are saying – this is not how God intended the world to be. Something is wrong and something has been lost and nothing will ever be the same again

But wait –

What's that?

There is a shoot coming out of that stump. It's tiny but it's green and it's growing

This land CAN support life! And this land....this land has enough water and is fertile – at least enough for one small shoot

And that's enough for hope.

That small green shoot, Isaiah says, that shoot will be filled with the very Spirit of God

And this land WILL and CAN live in peace

With leaders who lead in wisdom and understanding and....how does he say it again?

(read versed 1-9)

This is not a fool's dream. This is the very promise of God.

Centuries later, another prophet and another tree.

John the Baptizer, bless his heart....John says to a people grown tired of waiting, grown spiritually lazy and insular,

Speaks to them again in the words of old Isaiah and says

This will come to pass. The mouth of the Lord has spoken it.

What YOU need to do – ALL of you – is not sit back in the branches waiting

Not rest in the limbs of your family tree

Not use your parents and grandparents as protection or excuse for what's wrong with this land and with your life.

“Do not presume to say to yourselves ‘we have Abraham as our ancestor’, for I tell you God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire”

You – YOU need to work with God to make this world of peace real. Be your OWN tree. Bear the fruit of wisdom and understanding andall of the other things Isaiah said. Here and now. You're going in the wrong direction -- repent – turn around just....turn around. And start with one simple act of radical peace. Step into these waters. Let it be a sign that you desire to bear fruit worthy of this amazing life you've been given.

This tree that is your life – as fragile as the tree is Isaiah's world that's true. And we can all be reduced to stump in the twinkling of an eye that's simply how life is. The axe is lying at the root of the trees....

But right now is the time to make peace

Right now is the time to turn around

Right now is the time to bear the fruit that is worthy of the one for whom we wait

May God bless you AND whatever Christmas tree will be yours

Amen