

Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Lena, IL – 4 December 2022
Second Sunday of Advent - Year A

1st Reading: *Isaiah 11:1-10*

Psalm: *72:1-7, 18-19*

2nd Reading: *Romans 15:4-13*

Gospel: *Matthew 3:1-12*

Sermon - *Vicar Thomas J. Mosbø*

In the name of the Father, ✝ and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Both Isaiah and John the Baptist mention trees in our readings today, so let's think a little bit about trees. Here's a picture of one type of tree:



1 - This is a really nice, symmetrical, full, leafy tree. It's almost perfect, but not quite. It could use just a little trimming at the bottom to fix it up. And it's in a very pleasant setting, a park it looks like, with other trees around it, and lush grass beneath it. It seems to have gotten plenty of rain and sunlight, and the other trees around it have given it protection against the elements. It's the sort of tree we might have liked to sit under or climb when we were children and listen to the wind blowing through the leaves.

And if we could picture ourselves as a tree, this might be the type we would want to be, lovely, in a perfect setting, with no stress, nothing to prevent us from living and growing in a good way. But I do have to wonder - what might happen to this tree if a really bad storm came against it, with hurricane force winds and torrential rains? Would it stand, or would it be blown down? Has it developed deep roots, or has it never needed to because it has easy access to the water that gives it life?

Then there is our second tree.



2 - Here it is, among rocks, out in the open on a barren hill, with no protection. We can see how the wind has blown it throughout its entire life. It is gnarled and its branches have become bent as it has struggled to survive against the elements. And because it has already withstood so much, we know that it will continue to live. We know its roots must be deep and hold onto the earth with great strength. It has probably already experienced storms greater than the first tree had ever faced. And maybe it has even lost some limbs along the way, and yet it hangs on.

I think that some of us are much more like this tree than we are the first. I know that some of you have experienced hardships that have left you feeling bent and windblown. But I also know that you have kept your faith in God, hanging on to the ground of your beliefs and your hopes throughout the trials and tribulations that have come against you: the loss of loved ones, the loss of income, debilitating diseases.

And there are other types of stress and strain that we experience. During these holiday times, we often have expectations that family get-togethers will be joyous and without tensions. But we find instead that there are often conflicts, bad feelings, arguments. What we hope will be pleasant may turn out to be a huge disappointment. It can be extremely painful to face such situations, but it is precisely at such times that we need to draw on the roots of our faith, to know that God offers forgiveness, and that we can go to him in prayer and look to the Scriptures for wisdom and strength. We can love others even when it is difficult because God loves us and has taught how we, too, are to love.

And I know that sometimes we feel alone, not protected, subject to all the storms of life. And perhaps we feel that we have been shaped by those storms, even bent and twisted, so that we do not look like the tree in the pleasant park, surrounded and protected by others. And although we may long for a life of peace and tranquility, we continue to stand and to live as God asks us in spite of the weathering we have experienced.

But there is a real beauty in this windblown tree. It has a shape and a grace that is unique, that is a blessing from God. It has proven its strength, and it probably has rich stories and wisdom to relay to us. There are those who, like the first tree, may seem to be flourishing and living the ideal life, but when hardships do come, their roots - their faith in God - may not be strong enough to withstand them, and they may fall. But the tree that has deep roots will thrive.

And then there is the third tree.



3 - This is the tree that Isaiah was writing about. No matter how strong it may have once been, it has been chopped down, and only a stump remains. The people of Israel were chopped down in Isaiah's day. The ten northern tribes were conquered by the Assyrians. David's descendants still reigned in Jerusalem over the tribe of Judah, but they very seldom followed David's ways, and often abandoned their faith in God. So no matter how deep the roots of faith remained among the Jews Isaiah was writing to - their own faith in God - they had been reduced to a stump, and so, it seemed, had David's dynasty - David the son of Jesse. And what good were the roots if there was no tree to feed through them? Where was God, and how could he bless his people if his people had been so reduced?

We, too, may sometimes ask where God is, when it doesn't just seem that storms are coming against us, but that we ourselves have no life left to face those storms? What good are the roots when there is no tree?

We long for life, and we call out to God: Come and help us.

And what does Isaiah say? Isaiah speaks of hope:

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

²The 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.”

“On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.” Isaiah saw a future for the dynasty founded by David, the line of kings descended from him. The tree of David, the king God had promised to bless forever, had been reduced to a stump. But Isaiah saw something new.

We have a fourth tree.



4 - A new branch can grow up out of a stump that seems to be dead. God would re-establish the dynasty of David in a new and unexpected way. Jesus, not only the descendant of David, but the very Son of God, would be a new branch, who would bring new life not just for the people of Israel, but for all of us. Even though it looks to be just a tiny new branch, growing like a sapling out of an old, seemingly dead stump, that new branch would become the strongest of all trees, with the deepest of all roots, who would weather every storm, and who would bear fruit that would feed us eternally.

Well, I seem to have wandered into a mixed metaphor here. Are we trees ourselves, with roots of faith in God, who long to thrive and endure? Or are we people who long to eat the fruit from the tree of eternal life, which is Jesus Christ our Lord? And, of course, we can be both. The root of the faith of Abraham, Moses, David, Isaiah, John the Baptist, Peter and Paul, and all the rest, is the same root as our own faith - and this is why we know it is not just something we have invented ourselves. The root is God himself, the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, and our life is in him.

John the Baptist warned in this morning's Gospel that "even now the ax 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." He bids us to repent and bear good fruit. And we are able to do so because the true root of our own trees is Christ our Lord.

And so we pray this Advent that Christ would come into our hearts anew to give us life, strength, endurance, and faith in our souls, spirits, hearts, minds, and bodies, that we can be all that we long to be and all that he wants us to be.

Amen!

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