

*Isaiah 11:1-10*  
*Romans 15:4-13*  
*Matthew 3:1-12*

When was the last time that you saw a tree stump?

Stumps are a sign of life gone awry. Growth may have been happening in unhealthy ways, which threatened the welfare of people or perhaps the tree itself. Sometimes a stump is among many stumps. Then it's a visible sign of the brokenness of our human relationships with creation – showing our over-dependence on trees to provide for the things of our lives. Perhaps you can think of other things shown by the presence of a stump.

At the time that our passage from Isaiah was written, in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., Israel was on the powerless side of a bad relationship. Its people were being violently attack by the nation of Assyria. The nation of Israel had been so glorious before. Leaders like Kings David and Solomon had come from the family tree of Jesse. They had helped to bring the people of Israel to a flourishing life, which brought glory to God. But now the tree was nothing. It had been cut off by the conquering empire. It became a virtual stump, with no more growth or glory involved.

Our lives, and our faith lives, may not be under siege, as Israel had been by Assyria. Yet there is a big difference between our heart's hopes and longings for life – and what they actually are. It can seem like our lives are filled with stumps – signs of life cut off, where life had once thrived. We see them reflected in the changes that have happened in our society, whether years ago or just recently. Our world has a host of economic problems, which are reflected in struggles for our

households and our congregation. It can seem like there is increased violence around us, or at least an increased focus on it, or celebration of it. Faith, and perhaps specifically Christian faith, which used to be an integral part of our society, has fallen on the priority list of the majority of people. Our churches have become invisible, amid the demands of work and community commitments.



This section from prophet *Isaiah* served as beacon of promise and hope, for the people of Israel at the time. At the end of the chapter before this, the prophet promised that God will act in ways to end the current violence and oppression. The tree of Assyria, which had grown to be powerful and oppressive, would be cut down. “[T]he Lord of hosts[...] will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low.” (*Is. 10:33*)

And what about Israel, “the stump of Jesse”? Our text today proclaimed that “[a] shoot shall come out,” “and a branch shall grow out of its roots.” (*11:1*) The prophet assured that a leader would spring forth from what appeared to be a place of death. This leader would be blessed by God’s spirit, blessing him with “wisdom and understanding,” “counsel and might,” “knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” (*11:2*) The best part is that this king would lead with love that embraced God’s sense of justice. “[W]ith 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 the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.” (*11:4-5*) This king would be as no one the earth had seen before. He would be faithful and righteous, far surpassing even the legendary King David. His actions would lift up the poor and the afflicted to life again. He would bring justice to all the people around him.



As Christians, we read *Isaiah* as a prophecy predicting more than just a human king. The expectations are set so incredibly high. The sin and brokenness of humanity would never allow a normal person to fulfill those hopes. As Christians, we hear this text as a forecast of Jesus Christ – he was from that family, a “shoot... from the stump of Jesse.” (11:1)

In this Advent season, we look forward to the fulfillment of all of God’s promises, shared through *Isaiah*. We prepare to celebrate the birth of the Christ child, the gift of God’s self to our broken world. But his birth was just the beginning of the transformation that humanity saw through Jesus in his life, death, and resurrection. His birth was also the beginning of how God will recreate our world when the kingdom comes in fullness, when Christ comes again.

Verses 6-8 describe a transformation of all creation, which presses far beyond human relationships. Even animals will one day relate to each other in very different ways. They will no longer see one another either as a threat or as food. Instead, they will dwell together in communion and harmony, as had never been possible. The idealistic vision of pairs like cow and bear grazing together is a vision that extends to impacts our human lives, too. Now, we take extra care to make sure that our children are in relatively safe places. Yet in this promised day, “The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den.” (11:8) In these days to come, the world and the creatures in it will be so healed that everywhere will be safe. We will all live in harmony with God and one another.



If this is God's promise, we want to fast-forward straight ahead to the good stuff. We want to forego any preparation time, and ignore any wilderness or pain. But we can't speed ahead to receive the fullness of God's grace and love and justice. Our hands are full right now – and we will have to let go of so many things. We'll need to acknowledge the sin and death that fill our lives first – our grief, our fears, our attachment to things that will not last, our selfish and self-protective ways. We'll have to face our disordered relationships with one other, with creation, and with God. Only then will we be able to celebrate the beautiful new growth and fruit that comes through Christ, the shoot of Jesse.

The time will come for Christ to come again and the kingdom to be among us. And when that happens, God will turn us a new direction that we can't see from here. Our priorities will be shifted, so that God will truly be the center of our lives. We will be transformed from stumps into trees, abounding with branches and bearing fruit. Our lives, and the life of all creation, will show forth the fullness of God. Only God could make possible all these things, by the fiery power of the Holy Spirit.

God is preparing us to listen to the word, to see God's vision for life before us, and to imagine the possibilities. God is preparing us to let go of what holds us back, so that our lives may be transformed. Thanks be to God.