

12-8-19 CCI SERMON Isaiah 11: 1-10

December is a tough month for me while people around me enjoy all the celebration, parties, the lights and decorations, the gift buying, and joyful music. You see, two people who were important to me died in December- my father died on December 6, Saint Nicholas Day (this is the Saint Nicholas I bought him in the hospital gift shop that morning) and our son died on December 22(this is his favorite Christmas tree ornament as a child that we hang it on the front of our tree now each year). Even one of my favorite cats died on the day after Christmas the same year my dad died. Three lives cut off before I was ready. So every year when Advent rolls around, without my even thinking about it, my spirit begins to remember and sink. Oh, I can still sing cheerful Christmas carols and preach and teach, share gifts and laugh, and even have sincere moments of joy, (Don't worry, I won't be a party pooper next Sunday) but underneath... I understand when people find it hard to experience joy at Christmas time.

Today's scripture from Isaiah 11 speaks to me this Advent, because Isaiah described two images where death and sadness don't have the last word. Isaiah's first image is of an old dead stump. We understand stumps. Where once lived a lovely tree is now only a stump. There aren't many uses for old dead stumps; in fact, they tend to get in the way. In our backyard, the previous owner had planted 3 fir trees that grew to be huge and shaded a lot of the yard. But, she had planted them way to close to the fence and they were uprooting the fence. So when she moved, her guardian cut down the fir trees to prepare the house for sale. Cut them down but left the huge stumps. Before Rob and I could plant new bushes along the fence, those three huge stumps had to go. Nope, old dead stumps don't have much use most of the time.

But Isaiah noticed 2 things about this stump that were different from most stumps. This one had a name- the stump of Jesse. Jesse was the father of Israel's favorite king David. Kings in his day were always an heir of the previous king, so David's throne had had multiple kings after him from David's lineage. Not all of Israel's kings had been honorable; many had been quite corrupt and faithless. Isaiah saw Israel's line of kings cut off, leaving behind Jesse's old, dead stump.

But as Isaiah looked closer, he saw a new green shoot growing up from Jesse's stump ... and as he watched, it grew into a branch, and then even produced fruit. New life sprang up from Jesse's stump. That meant a new king was coming. It wouldn't be a corrupt, faithless king like so many of the previous ones, but would be a righteous king, a wise king, a king who would bring justice for the poor, who

will make decisions not by what he sees with his eyes or hears with his ears. No, this king would make decisions based on wisdom from God no matter what he saw or heard. Because the Spirit of the Lord would rest on this king and guide his life and rule. No more corruption, no more bribery, no more of the powerful taking advantage of the poor, no declaring he could do anything he wanted just because he was king. This king would find his delight, not in wealth, power, or fame, but in the fear and reverence of the Lord. In this season, we celebrate that one starry night centuries later, God sent his own Son to be born of Mary in the city of Bethlehem, the city of David, born to be that newborn king from Jesse's stump who would be God's Messiah, be filled with the Spirit. God was bringing new life out of Jesse's stump.

Isaiah's second image is of the peaceable kingdom, the world as we know it turned upside down, nature itself even changed. We've all had enough science classes to understand that in our animal kingdom, there are animals that eat meat and others that feed on plants. I didn't grow up on a farm so it saddens me to watch one animal eat another animal. I feel sorry for the one being eaten even though I understand that it is a natural process. And I appreciate a well-grilled steak and yes, I know that a cow died for me to have that pleasure. But I don't like the killing. In high school biology class, we were given a frog to examine. We were given a pointed tool so we could pith our own frog which required us to stab the frog through one of his eyes, twisting the tool around and smashing until our frog died. I couldn't do it. I also still remember the time Rob and I went on a vacation and left our cat at home alone with plenty of food and water and the cat door to get in and out. When we returned, we found several small dead animals lined up in the dining room, I think our cat meant to impress us with his hunting skills. There were two birds, a chipmunk, and a baby rabbit. He was so proud, but I felt sad for them, especially the cute little bunny.

So Isaiah's second image appeals to me. Isaiah invites us to imagine a world where no part of creation destroys another part, either for survival, wealth, or fun. A world where life reigns, and death is no more. No one's life is cut short before we are ready. Isaiah pictures powerful animals of prey living alongside powerless, vulnerable animals without killing or being killed. The wolf lying down with the lamb, the leopard sleeping with a young goat, the lion and the calf, the bear with the female cow. Baby animals have no fear beside the cobra and a toddler can play by a snake's den. Everyone is vulnerable, and yet all are at peace. A world where death and sadness no longer have the last word.

This is not normal! Several of you have told me about visits to your property by bears this year, and not one of you has told me about enjoying rolling around in the grass with those bears... And perhaps most strange of all in that world, even the most vulnerable human, a child, will lead them like a shepherd. A child lead? This was stunning in an age where children were considered the property of their parents. Children didn't lead; children followed. Isaiah's image of a child leading gives new meaning to Jesus' words, "Unless you change and become like little children, you will never enter the kingdom of heaven." ⁴ Therefore, whoever takes the lowly position of this child is the greatest in the kingdom of heaven." Jesus was speaking the values of Isaiah's peaceable kingdom, turning social status and power structures upside down. Power and status in God's kingdom are not found in our size, strength, education, or wealth, but in humbly serving others and taking care of the most vulnerable among us. It's a beautiful image we need today.

So, do we serve a God who brings new life out of old dead stumps? Yes! Can I get an Amen! In the story of Jesus' birth, God gave Zechariah and Elizabeth new life- a son in their old age after they had been barren. Jesus raised people like Lazarus from the dead, brought new sanity to a man with mental illness, brought sight to the blind, healing to the sick, hope to the hopeless. All signs of new life. And best of all, God raised his Son out of a stone cold tomb to life eternal on Easter morning. And one day we will join him in that life eternal where death and sadness not only do not have the last word, they are no more.

I began today with an awareness of death that returns to me every December. But that's not the end of the story. Because God was at work bringing new life through those deaths. Rob and I were still living in Iowa on December 17 when in a phone call, I accepted the position of Chaplain at Judson Park Retirement Community. I called both our kids that day to let them know we would be moving back to Washington. Our son, Matt, was very excited, and we made arrangements for him to meet me at the hotel I would be staying in at first and help me unload my car and go to dinner. It was such a wonderful call. My last words were, "I love you, Matt." His were, "I love you too, Mom." Five days later he died suddenly and all the good times I imagined were gone, dead. I was devastated, the pain was the worst I had ever known. But the Lord was near me and brought me through.

When I arrived at Judson, I was immediately faced with the deaths of residents and needed to be present with them and their families in their grief even though I was still living my own grief. And along the way, I began to recognize that

God was growing a new life in me because of the death of Matt and my father. Giving me words to say, and also the ability to be silent. As a nurse I had dealt with death occasionally, but I had never sat by the bedside with the family as their loved one died. I had never personally experienced what they were going through. Until Matt died, and my father before him. And as much I still do not like how I learned it, living through their deaths gave me the pastoral heart needed to be a good Chaplain. God grew new life in me out of my grief. And he's not done yet.

This congregation has had your days of being like a tall healthy fir tree. You grew through the fire that burned your first building down, and you had your tallest days in the 50's, 60's and 70's. But then the decline came, and here you are. Some may see this church as an old dead stump taking up space like those fir tree stumps in our backyard. But what if God is growing a little shoot from the stump, new life with a bridge ministry? And what if God is already preparing a minister with a similar dream and the skills needed? What is needed most? Well, you need the right pastor, the one God has in mind. That pastor needs skills, leadership, energy, a love of God and God's Word, a love for people of Issaquah, and a big heart. But your new pastor is not your savior.

You will also need people to follow the new pastor as he/she leads the way. People who will use their spiritual gifts in ministry. People who will give financially. People who will pray and pray and pray some more. People who will continue to grow in God's Word and living God's ways. People who are patient and flexible. Sometimes churches focus so much on finding the right **pastor** they neglect the importance of being the right **church**.

Friends, it was the Spirit of the Lord that gave life and wisdom and power to the new king, to our king, Jesus Christ. And it is the Spirit of the Lord that can prepare and empower this congregation to become a church with a bridge ministry that outlives all of you. A church that once again helps people give their lives to Christ, children and babies out talking the pastor during the sermon, and new ministries springing up. Without the Spirit's power and leading, it will not happen. But with the Spirit.... God can do more than we can even imagine. Spirit of the Living God, fall afresh on us.