

December 4, 2022 Second Sunday of Advent

Ladue Chapel Presbyterian Church

Isaiah 11:1-10

"We Will Not Be Stumped"

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Hum. Fizz. Slurp. Growl. Crackling. Jingle. These, one and all, are onomatopoeic words, words that imitate the sound of what they represent. When I hear the Isaiah text just read, the most important word to me is another onomatopoeic word, "stump." I am not sure if it quite fits the category as closely as the previous words which literally make the sound they represent, but the word "stump" certainly brings to mind what it represents. The word sounds stunted and squat and lifeless, just like what is left behind when a once majestic and glorious tree, with a long trunk and branches festooned with green leaves reaching toward the heavens, is cut down to nothing.

Now you may ask how in the world with this text filled with delightful words of hope such as "wisdom and understanding," "counsel and might," and "spirit of knowledge," have I landed my attention on "stump." Some may say it is because I do enjoy the occasional pessimistic moment. At a previous church I served the staff referred to me by the nickname, Johnny Dark. But I do not think that is why I gravitate to the stump in this text.

I am drawn to the word not for its potential pessimism, but because it grounds in reality the shimmering words of promise we also heard read. I like rainbows and sunshine and endless days of joy as much as the next person. But when somebody starts eloquently pontificating with such words, I want to know how the heck the words relate to the very imperfect, muddling-through-our-days existence in which we actually live. Please do not waste my time with pretty pictures of the peace-able kingdom if they do not connect to my actual life. Disconnected daydreams all too easily slip through our fingers. When we are frustrated by our work, terrified by what is going on across the globe, worried about our children, and clamoring for some center of gravity to which we can cling, cotton candy in the air will not do the trick.

But, a stump. You can grab a hold of a stump. The stump in this text, "the stump of Jesse" refers to the lineage of the Davidic Kings, Jesse being David's father. What started out so

promisingly with a faithful and bright, young, shepherd king, eventually led to a divided nation on the verge of being dragged into exile. Against God's better judgment, after much pleading, God gave Israel the monarchy they so strenuously sought, and in the end it led to immense failure.

These words from Isaiah are spoken to a people who carry around in their mouths the steely taste of failure and anxiety over the future. They know all about the stump. They know the dream that has died. They know the nation is about to be consumed. They know lives defined by upheaval. If you talk to them about hope and you do not mention the stump sitting before them they will never hear you.

We all have stumps in our lives. Dreams denied. Dreams eternally deferred. Things in our lives that make us ache and hunger over what has been lost, or what could have been, or what should have been. Relationships that have failed. Loved ones who have died. Visions for our lives that have never materialized the way we thought they would.

Yes, we have stumps, each and every one of us. And we as a nation are in the midst of a stump moment. We are in the midst of a zeitgeist of mistrust and polarization. It feels as if there is no common center in which we stand together. Yes, there are stumps in each of our lives, and a stump we share as a nation in this time.

When we find ourselves facing a stump it may feel as if God has let us down in some way; that God has been somehow absent in some important element of our lives. I am sure that is how the nation of Israel felt when they watched the monarchy crumble and their nation collapse. This text from Isaiah owns the reality of the existence of those stumps in our lives. But it also contradicts the notion that God could ever be absent in any element of our lives.

Our feelings to the contrary, the holy one does not ever retreat from our side for a single moment. In the midst of loss, our perception of God's presence can get paved over. As if a dark and lifeless parking lot has covered a verdant garden, once alive and full of possibility. But it is amazing what is below the surface of that black bitumen; what is not seen, but still at work in our lives, as individuals and as a community. Life is germinating below the surface. Life that will push through the darkness that covers and cracks its way to the surface green and alive; tender shoots of growth that push their way through the pavement of our current circumstances and clouded perceptions.

God is always at work with us and within us, even and especially in the times and place of our lives that can appear so bleak. Even working to repurpose the very mistakes we have made into something saving and true.

God knew the creation of a monarchy was not the answer for the nation of Israel. But the people begged and begged for one. God eventually relents and they are given a monarchy. But when the monarchy fails, God is not done with the nation, God is not finished with seeking to give Israel what it needs, what we all need.

Through Isaiah, God brings word of a new king, a new kind of king; a radical reinterpretation of kingship, of power. God defines for us what is needed even if we are slow to come to the party and understand exactly what we need. Israel thought they needed a warrior king for their nation to prosper and be safe in perpetuity. In the wake of that failure they may have felt that God had failed them when in reality what had happened is that their expectations about what God should do had failed. What we need to know as well, is that God is not done with any of us, and not done with where we are being led, as individuals, as a community, as a nation.

This time of year is a season of expectations. Children dream of Christmas morning loot. Parents strive to create perfect memories of what they hope will be a magical season. Families gather around large tables in hopes of bathing in the warm candlelight of a meal with food inspired by Martha Stewart and feelings inspired by Norman Rockwell. In the church we have our own set of hopes and expectations of crowded sanctuaries, awe inspiring worship services, and the arrival of a savior, God in our midst, brilliant and beatific.

And the one thing I can guarantee you about these expectations is, they will not be met, at least not in the way we envision them in our minds. The wrong presents may be purchased. The roast may be dry and overcooked. Aunt Sally and Grandpa will engage in their annual political debate. One of the narrators of the Christmas pageant will come down with strep throat. And in the midst of all of it, there will be wonderful and surprising blessings we cannot yet imagine.

This is also the time of year when expectations lost are particularly poignant. We cannot help but notice the empty chair at the table that should be filled by a loved one who died too soon. Estrangements and ruptured family relationships cast a shadow over what is supposed to be a time of harmony. As the

year comes to a close, cherished goals for our lives will go unmet.

Yes, there are stumps. All kinds of stumps to be found. But Isaiah's words from God speak directly to us, particularly when bleakness appears to reign. The Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, wrote, "The prophet is a person who, living in dismay, has the power to transcend his dismay" (Heschel, p. 240)

We are given word of a glorious Messiah on the way. The arrival of the King of Kings, bringing a kingdom like no other..

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, 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 adder's 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."

The words are evocative and beautiful and they confound every expectation. The Israelites were continually surprised by how God was at work in their midst. And the older I get the thing in which I am most confident is that God will continue to confound our expectations at every turn.

So what do we watch for in this season? What should we expect to see? I have no clue. But on what I am betting my entire life is that each and every stump in our lives and in our life together is yet another location and opportunity in which God is at work. Perhaps at the moment solely beneath the surface, but at work nonetheless, preparing the soil for healing, for new life, for abundance beyond our comprehension. There are no final conclusions that end with a dead end stump. God is in the business of bringing new life in all places, in even the most unexpected places.

Thanks be to God. Amen

Heschel, Abraham, *Between God and Man*, Simon and Schuster, New York
1959.