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A Shoot from the Stump of Jesse

a sermon on Isaiah 11.1-10

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What a beautiful passage! No wonder it has inspired so many artists and writers through the ages. The perfect king. The perfect kingdom. No wonder it has given hope and joy to believers across centuries, so that we cherish it. This passage, however, is not like a family heirloom Christmas ornament. Something pretty we bring out every year at Christmas to admire, and we carefully protect it, and we pass it down to our children and grandchildren. This passage is beautiful, and we do pass it down from one generation to another. But it is also a living, breathing Word from God full of energy and fight. It is less like a keepsake ornament and more like the flag of those who refuse to surrender. We wave it defiantly against all the evil and suffering in the world, and boldly assert, "Our God reigns!"

What I like about this passage is the images. That's how it speaks to me. That's what makes my pulse quicken. Two images in particular stick with me, and both of them appear on the banner we hang above the lectern every Advent and Christmas. If you've ever seen that banner and wondered what in the world it was about, it is about this passage. At the bottom is a large tree stump, with one little shoot growing up out of the center of it. In the middle, a wolf and a lamb lie down together. These images remind me of God's promise of a perfect king and his perfect kingdom.

The shoot from the stump reminds us of an ancient promise God has kept. Long ago, God promised King David that God would establish his throne forever. A descendant of David would always rule God's people. David was God's anointed king, his "messiah." *Messiah* means "anointed one." God promised another anointed one, a Messiah, who would do and be everything this passage says he would do and be. Jesse, of course, was King David's father. The stump refers to the fact that David's dynasty ended in 587 B.C. when the Babylonians conquered Jerusalem. God's people went into exile. They had no king of their own, just foreign rulers who often oppressed and exploited them. And it looked for all the world as if God's promise to David had failed. The faithful knew it hadn't. They kept hoping. They believed, even when good sense told them not to. They looked for a Messiah, who would deliver God's people and establish the throne of David forever.

For almost 600 years, Israel did not have a king from the line of David. They rarely had independence, but they never had a Davidic king. David's family tree had become

nothing but a stump. You can see why the gospels emphasize that Jesus was a descendant of David. That's why we are told he was born in Bethlehem, the city of David. God did not forget his promise. He did not change his mind. God is faithful. So, when the time was right, he sent his Son, a descendant of David, a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

When you hear this passage, when you see the shoot rising up out of the stump, that's God way of reminding you: God is faithful to his promises, and Jesus is the Messiah, the perfect king who establishes God's kingdom of peace and righteousness.

That promise has been fulfilled. We look at the stump, and we know it happened. After his death on the cross, Jesus rose again. He lives and reigns. He is Lord of all, and someday he will come to finish his work and make all things new. That's the promise we are still waiting for and the one symbolized by the wolf and the lamb.

Isaiah had a colorful way of picturing the peace and justice Jesus will bring. He could have talked about nations not going to war. He could have described communities where people live in harmony, not divided by race or class, a community without violence and crime. But Isaiah found a way to give us all that and more with a simple image: The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. Children will play near snakes in perfect safety. Isaiah is reaching back here to the beginning of the Bible. In Genesis, the garden of Eden, God puts enmity between the woman and the serpent. In Isaiah's vision of the perfect kingdom, that enmity is gone. The effects of sin in the world are gone. There is no sin, no brokenness. In Eden, we put enmity between humanity and God. That's gone too. The earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

That's the perfect kingdom, the Messiah's kingdom, or as Jesus liked to call it: the kingdom of God. Oh, I know it sounds too good to be true. That's why some have scoffed. "That's nothing more than a dream," they say, "It will never happen." Others, inspired by the sheer beauty of it, continue to hope. Some have thought they could make it happen on their own. Too many misguided would-be Messiahs have caused war and suffering in pursuit of the perfect kingdom. Only God can make it happen. Only Jesus Christ, the Messiah, can make it a reality. And he will. It seems too good to be true, but if you know the living Savior, you know he can do it.

It is a beautiful passage. I hear it with my eyes. I wish I could hear it with my gut, but I can't. I have tried, but so far I haven't succeeded. Maybe I am too safe and comfortable. Maybe we all are. Truth be told, this is not the kind of leader we hope for. Isaiah's perfect king is full of the Holy Spirit and zeal. He establishes justice and defends the weak. He strikes the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his mouth kills the wicked. That's more than we really want. We want a leader who can keep our country safe and give us prosperity. More jobs, lower taxes. That's what we want,

because we are comfortable. We don't want the whole world turned upside down. We just want it tweaked a little. Isaiah says the world's going upside down.

That was good news for people in his day. When Isaiah was prophesying, the Assyrians invaded Judah and laid siege to Jerusalem. God's people were in danger. They were starving. King Hezekiah was OK, but he was not the perfect king by a long shot. Those people could have heard this passage with their gut. They would have prayed, "Please God! Don't wait another day! Give us your king! Give us your kingdom!"

The same can be said for God's people during the exile. They had lost everything. Isaiah's perfect king is exactly what they wanted. A Davidic king, back in power, ruling with justice, establishing peace. They heard this with their gut.

In the time of Jesus also, this was the deepest longing of every faithful Jew. They were tired of being ruled by the Romans. They were poor, most of them. They couldn't hope for justice. That's why people turned out in droves when Jesus proclaimed, "The kingdom of God is near." He was the long-awaited king, but few could see it. Even Jesus' disciples misunderstood his ministry. They thought God's kingdom could be established very simply, just by getting rid of the Romans. But of course, the perfect kingdom requires a lot more than that. Perfect peace and justice require a new humanity. God has to change our hearts. Plus, God had a larger vision. All the disciples could see was Israel. God loved the whole world.

When Jesus rose from the dead, his disciples asked him, "Now are you going to restore the kingdom to Israel?" In other words, "You've proven you are the perfect king promised by Isaiah the prophet. Are you going to establish the perfect kingdom now?" Jesus told them, "It's not your place to know when. I have a mission for you." He told them to wait for the Holy Spirit and then to be his witnesses throughout the earth. That's what we have been doing since. The disciples, though, heard this prophecy with their gut. They longed for God's perfect king, and that longing drew them to Jesus.

In many times and places, especially when suffering has been great, God's people have heard this passage with their gut. We are so privileged, so affluent, I'm not sure we do. ... Unless, we send a son or daughter off to war. ... Or terrorists threaten our way of life. ... Or economic collapse makes us afraid. ... Or we reflect that we live in the most technologically advanced, most powerful, most prosperous nation in the history of the world, and things are still a mess! Obesity is an epidemic problem, so much so that the First Lady of the United States has made fighting childhood obesity her special cause—and the city council of San Francisco outlawed fast food meals with toys. Yet at the same time many people go hungry, many children go hungry. I heard recently that 1 in 7 Americans lives in poverty. Meanwhile, more children than ever before are growing up without a father in the home. Drugs are such a problem that we are teaching our

kindergarteners to “Just say no.” Our children are still children when they learn about sex, and this comes with a price much too high for many of them. Americans desperately crave community, but we have largely forgotten how to live together. We are a nation rapidly forgetting God and our neighbors. A nation where even Christians are biblically illiterate and far too many people do not know the Savior. They are lost, but in their comfort and prosperity, they do not know it.

Maybe we *can* hear this Word from God with our gut, and not just with our eyes. And if we can, then this truly is a vision of hope for the whole human race. If we with our affluence can look at this picture of Jesus Christ, and say, “God, please, this is all I ask for,” then we really are human, and we are not too self-absorbed, for the deepest hope of the whole human race is ours too. We want peace and justice and righteousness.

Is that your hope this morning? Are you waiting for the kingdom of God? Or have you made your peace with the way things are now? Do you believe the promise? Do you know Jesus? Do you expect him to do what Isaiah said he would do?

I hope you do, and here’s why. First, because that is my hope. When I pray “Thy kingdom come, thy will be done,” I mean it. And it means something to me. But, second, and more importantly, this hope makes a big difference in your life today. Jesus may not establish God’s kingdom in all its glory anytime soon. Who knows when he will do it? It doesn’t matter when. Whenever it comes, you will be there, if you belong to him, because God will resurrect you to eternal life. So you won’t miss out. But in the meantime, hope changes you. It makes your life different.

Here’s how: If you long, with all your heart and soul, for God’s kingdom, you will love peace and justice and righteousness. And if you love those things, you will find yourself living them. Peace, justice, and righteousness are abstract concepts, but they cannot exist abstractly. They are only real when they describe how people live and act. Peace, for example, is not some nebulous idea that exists somewhere in the ether. Peace is what your home is like when people get along. Peace is what our church is like when people set aside personal pettiness and work together. Peace describes real people and communities in real situations. Peace is something you do. If you love God, if you long for his kingdom, you find ways to make peace.

Justice likewise is how you treat other people. How can you hope for God to reign over the earth with justice and then cheat a friend? Or lie to get ahead at work? Or cheat at school? Righteousness describes a life given to God. We are too broken to be righteous the way God is righteous. But we can love him in the things we do. From integrity in our work to compassion for people whom we often fail to notice, righteousness becomes real in us when we live it. And we will live it if we love it.

Simeon is a Bible character we usually only meet at Christmas. You remember Simeon—Luke chapter 2—God promised him he would live to see the Messiah. The Holy Spirit led him to the Temple on the day Jesus was dedicated as an infant, and told him, “Here he is! God’s perfect king!” Luke tells us Simeon “was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel [which is Luke’s way of saying what Isaiah said in our reading], and the Holy Spirit rested on him.”

I want to be Simeon. I want you to be Simeon. Set your heart on God’s promise. Seek first his kingdom. Wait for it with patience, but in the meantime, love peace. Love justice. Love righteousness. Love God and his perfect king, Jesus. When you do, those things will start to flavor your life. There’s no way they won’t. They will flavor your life, *and* you will find the peace and strength to fight on no matter how bad things get. God’s people always have. God’s promises keep us going. So remember the shoot from the stump of Jesse. Remember the wolf and the lamb lying together. And heed them well. Amen.

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