

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

Grace and peace to you from God who is, who was, and who is to come. Amen.

We had some good scripture lessons this morning, some of which are, I hope, are familiar to us. We had that wonderful passage from Isaiah - a friend of mine is very partial to this: "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." Then we had, of course, John the Baptizer, out in the wilderness, in Matthew's gospel, "Prepare the way of the Lord." Anyone who has ever seen the play *Godspell* should have recognized that passage.

And then what we heard from Romans, may not in and of itself, be overly familiar to us, we can at least resonate with those words, as we just heard the wise man say in the Children's Message, "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ as welcomed you." What struck me though, as I read all of those lessons, I remembered that Lutherans are, unfortunately, becoming increasingly biblically illiterate. Because, you don't have to raise your hand, but how many of you have actually gone home and read the stuff I told you to go home and read when I have not told you the entire story? I know only a handful of you have ever come up to me and said, "You know, I read that!" You should go do that: read it!

So what struck me is that many of you are probably asking, "Who is this Jesse that we're talking about?" Remember we heard in Isaiah, "A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Again in Romans, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

Who is Jesse? Why is he important? Well, we are not talking about my mother, Jessie. We are not talking about the 19th Century desperado Jesse James; nor do I even mean my friend Jesse Hannigan. The Jesse mentioned here, in both our Isaiah and our Roman's passage, is someone who is written about frequently, in the Old Testament. Jesse is the son of Obed, who was the grandson of Boaz. And, you all know who Boaz was, and I think it is kind of a cool thing the way this all ties together.

You don't know who Boaz was! Boaz is the guy who was the son of Rahab. Rahab was a former "working girl," who hung out in Jericho. You have to know Jericho because "*Joshua Fought the Battle of Jericho*" you know blows the trumpets, and the walls came tumbling down. Rahab was there in Jericho; she let the Israelites in; they saved Rahab. Rahab becomes the mother of Boaz. Boaz goes on to marry the daughter-in-law of Naomi. He inherits their land, and he and his new wife, Ruth, have a son who they name Obed. (Ruth - that's a whole book in the Bible. It's really a cool little story, only four chapters long. You can read it during the commercial breaks during the game this afternoon.) They have a son named Obed. Obed has a son named Jesse. Jesse in turn had seven sons, the youngest of whom is a kid named David. The **same** David that the prophet Samuel would anoint as the second kind of Israel. He also becomes the most popular king of all Israel or Judah. David, whose father was. . . Jesse.

What's so great about David? David is really hung-ho for the Lord God Almighty. The Lord tells David, (this happens in 2 Samuel 7) God makes this agreement with David: "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever." David is so on fire for God that God says to David "your throne shall be established forever." And because of what is said in this verse, it is believed, then, there will always a descendant of David on the Throne in Jerusalem.

Now, since most of us are not in the Affirmation of Baptism class, and those of us who are don't remember what I talked about four weeks ago, I am going to remind us. The Kingdom of Israel, when Solomon died (Saul, David, Solomon - there will not be a quiz, but remember this), Solomon dies, the kingdom splits in two. The northern kingdom is Israel, the southern kingdom of Judah, and it's in Judah that Jerusalem is. For all of its existence, there is a descendent of David on the throne, in Jerusalem, for the next 600 years or so. There is the fruit of the stump of Jesse there on the throne in Jerusalem.

Now, the southern kingdom of Judah falls to the Babylonians around 586 BC (you don't need to remember the date). It doesn't mean just because Jerusalem falls and the leadership is taken away into exile, it doesn't mean that David's family tree is wiped out. No, they are taken away in exile too. About 50 years later they're brought back, along with everybody else. They resettle in the Jerusalem area and they begin to do what all human beings do, they begin to procreate. So over the decades and centuries eventually the Italians come along, they take things over from the Greeks, who took things over from the Babylonians.

But then, in the backwater province of the Roman Empire, a son is born to a working class carpenter, a guy named Joseph. Joseph, son of Mattan, whose father was Eleazar, who was born to Eliud, who was the son of Achim, whose dad was Zadok, son of Azor, born to Eliaim, who was the son of Abiud, born to Zerubbabel and so on and so on and so on (aren't you glad you have the name that you do?). We can trace Joseph the carpenter's ancestry all the way back to Perez, who was the son of King David, who is the son of . . . Jesse.

Now, the thing that Isaiah says about this "root of Jesse," Paul reiterates in his letter to the Romans. That's really what John the Baptizer goes on about as well. But as we go along naming all of those folks, we might begin to think that there are a couple of groups – those who **are** important, the descendants of Jesse, and those who **are not**. Part of the problem when we start dividing people into groups, is that we begin to get those who are **in** and those who **aren't**. But as we listen to what Isaiah said, and as we hear the words of Paul, we can get the distinct impression that there **are** no divisions. At least not in God's mind. What did Paul say in Romans? "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope."

This means that the Gentiles are going to have hope in this descendant of Jesse. We have to remember that the Gentiles are very much the OUT group, at least from the Jewish point of view. They don't have the covenant; they don't have the promise; and that, at least from my point of view, is a big bummer, because, from my point of view, I am a Gentile. **That** is part of the problem that the church in Rome was facing. The Church in Rome was made up of believers who were Jewish, and believers who were Gentile. The believers who were Jewish were saying that the believers who were Gentile weren't really being saved, because the guys hadn't had a little bit of surgery. And, the

women weren't following all the right laws and going out and getting themselves cleansed in the proper way. So Paul is trying to explain in this letter to the Romans, that we are all equal. It doesn't matter what our genealogy is, we are, in the eyes of God, all equal. He is not talking about sometime when God is going to return, he is talking about **right now**. Today. There aren't those who are in, and those who aren't. We are all together.

Paul recognizes that this problem is going on in Rome, so he poses the question (earlier in the letter), What are you going to do about it? What are you going to do about the fact that you are dividing yourselves into these factions? To which Paul replies (he does this over and over again - he asks a question and then he answers it himself. I wish the guy could learn to not speak in questions!) (although, at least he doesn't speak parenthetically, like someone we're all being forced to listen to) Paul's answer to himself is that from God's point of view, we are ALL part of the "In" group. The only way that we all are not part of the In group, is that I take myself out. From God's point of view, we are all together. **You** can't shove me out, only *I* can shove me out.

Speaking as one who has rarely been part of the In crowd: In elementary school I was bit of a social reject; and in high school I was a band geek and in the drama club. If you ever want to be ostracized by the "cool" kids, that's the way to do it. But Paul has the answer: to God. All of us, **all of us**, are part of the In group. To put this in cell phone lingo - we are on God's "fave" list. We are all part of God's "Friends and Family" calling plan. We are all part of God's "Network." But how then, do we deal with those others, those we might normally not have as part of our "In" group? The ones we would just as soon not have in our calling plan. What did Paul encourage the Romans to do? What did the wise man encourage Frank to do in the Children's Message? "Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you."

Henri Nouwen was a writer who came up with the phrase, "voluntary displacement." He uses that phrase to get across the idea of creating unity amid a difficult diversity. He wrote, "The gospels confront us with this persistent voice inviting us to move from where it is comfortable, from where we want to stay, from where we feel at home." This shift of voluntary displacement is away from self-interest and toward group-interest; away from me to you, to put it in terms of God, it is moving from me to thee.

So how do we get to that point, where indeed the wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together? Because we have trouble getting along, don't we? We have difficulty been getting along with those we love and care for; how much more difficult it is to get along with those we really don't like. People we don't even know. Folks like the homeless guy you might pass on your way in to work, or the new kid in school who everybody makes fun of because she speaks differently. That person that was just hired in your department, that you know, you have to train to take over your position. The guy down in the Human Resource Office who has dropped some unsubtle hints that maybe your entire department is about to be shut down, so going for a different line of work might be a wise idea. So, how do you get along with somebody like that?

In the long run, we need to remember, that God is part of our life. We are not being called to be best friends with all of those people, but we are being called to love them, as Christ has loved us. To care for them in a Christlike manner. What we need to remember is that it is not our genealogy that saves

us. That is what John the Baptizer was telling the Pharisees and Sadducees. And as cool as I think it is to know where Jesse came from, that's not what saves us. Paul never says, nor does Jesus, that we have to be best friends with everyone. We **do** need to remember, though, that the whole "wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat" thing, is about a time yet to come, when the Messiah **will** be here, when we **will** all get along. Until that time, we are called to remember to live as those that have been baptized, not to live by our genealogy, not trusting in the blood of my ancestor or your ancestors, or even in the blood of Jesse's ancestor, but trusting, rather, in the Blood of Christ, whose birth we soon will celebrate.

Amen.

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