

"Green Shoots Appearing"

Second Sunday of Advent 8:15 & 11:00 AM Sunday, December 5, 2010
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

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

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

(Note to the reader: During the 11:00 service, Matthew Weston Clymans was welcomed into Trinity Lutheran Church through the Sacrament of Holy Baptism.)

All that remained was a stump. When we moved to our home in Camp Hill in July 1994, the rock garden in our backyard contained a variety of flowers, and in their midst was the stump of a tree. It was obvious the previous owner had cut the tree down just a few years prior, leaving the stump behind. Must have been one of those several less-than-adequate handyman projects we noticed around the house where the owner didn't call in a professional. He didn't have someone else dig the stump out or grind it down. It remained an unattractive centerpiece for any flowers I would plant in the rock garden. I am fairly sure it was a mimosa tree, so I can't fault the previous owner for wanting to cut it down. It would have grown far too large to be that close to our house. I understand the mimosa is rather invasive anyway, and we find it flourishing along Pennsylvania highways. Invasive is the word, for even with just a stump remaining, I found that over the next several years, I was routinely plucking up little shoots of mimosa from the garden—it was to be my regular weeding exercise. Had I left the garden unattended, who knows how many mimosa trees would be flourishing there now? Eventually, even those shoots stopped coming up. The stump now seems lifeless, well hidden by daylilies to the rear and marigolds to the fore. You hardly know the stump is there. But it is.

It takes a prophet named Isaiah to point the stump out to us. In the chapter previous to the one we read from today, Isaiah describes a wasteland, destroyed in battle, forests hewn down with axes. In part, he's describing how the Lord God will make judgment on Israel's enemy, Assyria, and destroy it. But Isaiah is also describing the situation Israel herself faces—a mere remnant of a people so long oppressed, so many times conquered, and so frequently ruled by incompetent and faithless rulers—that it is but a stump in the ground. You would hardly know the nation Israel was there. It appears lifeless.

But Isaiah points the stump out to us, and calls us to imagine what he says will be: *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* The prophet here, by invoking the name "Jesse" (who was the father of King David, the greatest king ever to serve in the nation of

Israel) was clearly saying that hope was not lost, that Israel was not dead. For a ruler would arise out of the line of King David. He would be great and righteous and just, and the Spirit of the Lord God would be upon him. Under this king's rule, Israel would know new life, the nations of the world would finally see this stump of Jesse, and the knowledge of God would fill the earth.

As Christians, we look back on Isaiah's prophecy and consider how Jesus Christ was its fulfillment for us. Born of the house of David, Jesus, our King, is great and righteous and just. The very Spirit of God fills him. His life and death and resurrected life bring us new life. No wonder Isaiah's words are read in this Advent season as we prepare for Jesus' coming. They're very fitting words.

Besides, we need to hear them because we have a tendency not to notice the stump. Or look for the shoots. Such small things that signal God's activity in the world get overlooked in the larger competing and contrary activities of humans. In this week alone, here are a few of the things we are facing:

- Tensions escalating between North and South Korea.
- Wikileaks damaging our diplomatic relationship with world leaders.
- Continued high unemployment, and fears that the period for unemployment compensation checks won't be extended.
- Concerns about our mounting national debt.
- And the heart-wrenching photos of the nearly 100 local Pennsylvania National
- Guard deployed to Afghanistan and leaving behind their families.

Need I go on?

We can't see the stump and its shoots because we are overwhelmed by everything else we see. And we suppose that the only way through this mess of human activity that seems so huge is to have a God who would seem more huge still. I think John the Baptist, who in our Gospel lesson today prophesied the coming of Jesus, was probably looking for someone larger, more grand, more tough, moresomething than the Jesus who actually came. For John the Baptist sure talked up his version of the Messiah to the crowds going out to him in the wilderness: *Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. I baptized you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me...He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand...*

After all, only someone larger than life could take on the things that this life dishes out.

But Isaiah points us back to a stump. He has us look for the shoots. He tells us the king who is coming is great and righteous and just—only not in the strong-armed warrior way we would presume, but in the way God will have

him. This king will do right for the poor, and bring equity to the powerless, and the kingdom he establishes will be of a peace that can only be pictured as enemies sitting together in harmony, predator and prey enjoying each other's company. And no one and nothing will be hurt or destroyed on all his holy mountain.

How many Christmas cards have we received with Isaiah's image of a lion and a lamb resting together? How many times have we heard Isaiah's words "...and a little child shall lead them" and immediately thought of Jesus, the babe asleep in a manger?

Well, these words from Isaiah were read and heard in the early Christian Church at Rome. Paul writes in our second lesson about how these words were intended for God's people to have hope. Hope even when world events and individual trials threatened to reduce a person to despair. I appreciated how theologian Cynthia Campbell defined what hope is ... and is not. She said that for many, hope is something that is of last resort—after all our attempts to fix the world's problems fail, then we might just let God have a crack at it, and so we hope for the best. Campbell says the problem with this definition of hope is that we put ourselves at the center of the universe, and God's activity and presence are secondary. Others view hope in the same way one purchases a lottery ticket or gambles at a casino. We think there is some force out there—call it fate or chance or luck—and it will eventually swing our way. But Campbell says neither of those views of hope are what Paul is talking about: "Hope is not last resort or random chance." Instead, Paul considers the ground for hope to be God. Campbell says God is the guarantor of whatever he has promised, and so a believer may live with complete confidence that what God says will be *will* be.

And because our hope is grounded in God and his promises, then Paul says we can live out that promised peaceable kingdom in our communities now. He's writing this letter to Jewish Christians and non-Jewish Christians (Gentiles). These were not natural friends and companions, but people who prior to conversion had no reason to associated with each other. Now they are in the same congregation, and Paul says they are to welcome one another, live peaceably with one another, the way Jesus Christ has welcomed you and me. I think that means that our congregations, small and large, filled with a diversity of people, are God's little green shoots dotting the landscape of our world. I admit it's hard for the world to see us sometimes. We might even fear our best efforts get "weeded out" by life's circumstances. But we're here. We are being Spirit-led to witness to God's activity in the world. And, may I remind you, Spirit-led to **participate** in God's activity!

This was evident when I took an ornament from the Giving Tree in the Gathering Space. By Tuesday, when I looked for an ornament, there were not many ornaments left to be had. That's because so many of you had already taken an ornament and purchased the recommended gift for someone in need. What a blessing you all are! Well, I picked an ornament

for CROSS, the social service organization working with young people with developmental disabilities. The ornament asked me to purchase economy-sized boxes of facial tissue. It's such a small thing in the big scheme of things that boxes of facial tissue would be seen as gifts. (Then again, my in-laws often pick up items like toilet paper and laundry detergent on sale, and bring them to us when they visit, and I'm always happy to receive such gifts!) The point is our participating in God's work in this world, however small and humble, is our being little green shoots coming out all over the place, dotting the landscape of our communities with compassion, generosity and love.

Today Matthew Weston Clymans received the sacrament of Holy Baptism. With my hands on his head, I prayed for the same gifts of the Holy Spirit that Isaiah declared would rest on the ruler who was to come---gifts of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. In just a short couple of years, Matthew will join his older brother Andrew at Sunday School. See, now that Andrew is three, he's begun to attend Sunday School. It's such a small thing in the big scheme of things that two little boys would go to Sunday School, but I like to think that Matthew and Andrew, as members of this welcoming community, will find themselves growing up in joy and faith. Two little green shoots bursting out of the ground. Who knows where the Spirit of the Lord will lead them?

Obviously, boxes of facial tissue and children in Sunday School by themselves won't usher in God's peaceable kingdom. Ultimately, it will be God who brings the kingdom to fruition. You and I simply have the glad task of joining in the dance. So, come, Lord Jesus. **AMEN.**