

Stumped

This morning's text brings us to the beloved prophet Isaiah. Thanks to his inspired way with words and Handel's putting music to those words for the *Messiah*, we associate much of what Isaiah proclaims with Christmas and the birth of Jesus. I know the tree downtown has been lit and the Christmas parade has already passed by, but I'd like to press pause on the tinsel and eggnog for just a moment. Let's hear—if we can--Isaiah's invitation to enter *his* world for just a bit. Before we put baby Jesus in the manger, let's sit with our ancestors longing for new life centuries before the angels sang and the shepherds ran.

Isaiah's career began just as King Uzziah's was ending. In power for 41 years, Uzziah was a bit of a rock star, second in fame only to Solomon. Uzziah was both a skilled administrator and an impressive commander in chief. Under his leadership, economic resources and military strength soared, and Judah reached the peak of its power. So, Isaiah's ministry begins on the tail end of great prosperity.

But Assyria quickly changes the mood just as Isaiah is hitting his stride. During the late eighth century BCE, the Assyrians become a major threat. They have already annexed the kingdom of Israel to the north and now they stand on Judah's doorstep. To escape Assyria's clutches, Judah has forged a costly truce. As one scholar has written, "Isaiah [speaks] to a nation living through a cold war and anticipating a hot one."¹

The first four chapters of Isaiah move back and forth between decrying Jerusalem—the capital of Judah and the home of the Temple—as it is and celebrating Jerusalem as it will be when God has restored her. Our first text this morning has both. [Read Isaiah 5: 1-7]

If we heard heartbreak and a determination on God's part to keep loving God's wayward child last week, this morning we hear a somewhat different tone. While God may be resisting the urge to trample the vineyard with the divine boots, the Lord of all has clearly reached a breaking point in his relationship with

¹ Dwight E. Stevenson, *Preaching on the Books of the Old Testament*, as cited by the Rev. Dr. Heather Shortlidge in her paper for the Well, 2015. This background is adapted from that paper.

Judah. This One who lovingly shaped humanity from the ground and placed them in a fertile garden has worked tirelessly to remove rocks and weeds so that the people could thrive and flourish only to have the vine produce a worthless harvest. The grapes are bitter, a crop of violence and greed as another translation reads:

He expected a paragon of justice and righteousness—

but everywhere *injustice* runs bloodred *in the streets*, and cries echo *in the city!*²

The people have forgotten again who and whose they are. They have abandoned their call to love God and love neighbor, and God is heartbroken and disgusted. The verses that follow in chapter 5 spell out the people's failings in detail:

The first: violence. Always the poet, Isaiah uses the power of words to depict the gravity of this misstep: God expected justice (*mishpat*) but saw bloodshed (*mishpach*); righteousness (*zedaqah*) but heard a cry (*ze-aqah*). Rather than restraint, [the people] have chosen aggression. Instead of reaching out, they're indicted for coercive force.

The second offense: greed. 'You join house to house, add field to field, until there is room for no one but you.' Competing for limited resources, [the people of Judah have] squeezed out their neighbors.³

I think I have taken for granted how astounding it is that this is not the end of the story. Isaiah has many more chapters after this one ends, and blessedly by the grace of God, so do the children of God. The next few chapters paint a grim picture in some verses while giving us some of our favorites in others, such as those in chapter 9. And then we find ourselves in chapter 11. Once again, we may be quick to link these beautiful words with Jesus. Scholars believe however that they were originally written for the coronation of a more immediate heir to David's throne, King Hezekiah. The people are longing for help and hope, and Jesus isn't on their radar yet. Isaiah points first it seems to a human king who might reclaim the call to lead the people back to their holy roots. [Read Isaiah 11:1-5]

² Isaiah 5:7, *The Voice* translation

³ Shortlidge.

Tree stumps are stubborn things. It can be a major hassle and expense to grind them away, so it's not unusual to see a stump linger for a long while after a tree comes down. Occasionally new growth appears from what looks to be hopelessly long dead. Not all stumps generate new growth of course. I've been known to kill a house plant beyond all hope. In the moment I like to think my pruning is a good thing, but more often than not, pitiful stalks and stumps stare back at me, shaming me for my almost complete inability to give the plant just what it needs. And so many Saturday mornings when my impatience gets the best of me, I give up and wave the white flag and pitch the poor things overboard into an out-of-the-way spot in the backyard.

It's a judgment call, really. Not all stumps sprout new growth. Some stay stumps. Others are known to regenerate new life in the depths of their dying fibers. Patrick Caroff, a student at Penn State offers an explanation why some stumps sprout new life and others do not:

Stump sprouts come about from suppressed dormant buds at the root collar of a tree – the meeting place of the stem and roots – that become active in the case of injury or extreme environmental changes that induce stress. While there are dormant buds that exist all over the tree...[those] typically have a short lifespan after emergence and give rise to branches, not new stems (trunks). Dormant buds at the root collar, however, have traces all the way to [the very core of the plant] and in some species may live just as long if not longer than the main stem. They formed when the tree first put out roots and shoots.

The dormant buds grow slowly along with the tree; staying near the surface of the living wood beneath the bark. They also are believed to be genetically more juvenile which means that these buds are not necessarily a continuation of the tree's life but more of a revitalization, rebirth.⁴

So these buds, these shoots are part of the tree from the very beginning, and they only break through the surface when the tree is threatened, when the tree has been utterly disrupted, when the tree is cut back or broken down to a stump. Only then do these persistent little shoots break through. What strikes me in this

⁴ <https://extension.psu.edu/what-makes-some-tree-species-prolific-stump-sprouters>

moment is not the buds' persistence, but the recognition that the condition that causes them to emerge and grow is disruption. Disruption is the essential element that causes the buds to push through, to grow, and to form a tree on the stump, a tree that may well outlast the one from which it grew.

Isaiah tells us that "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Another translation reads:

But on this humbled ground, a tiny shoot, hopeful and promising,

will sprout from Jesse's stump;

A branch will emerge from his roots to bear fruit.⁵

*On this humbled ground...*from this defeated and decimated stump, something new will grow and flourish.

You do not need me to tell you that ours is a world in crisis. Some of you have commented recently that things seem to be worse than at any other time you can remember. Ours is world rife with division, violence, cruelty, dysfunction, meanness, and despair. In other words, we are facing a moment of extreme disruption. We are stymied, stumped even. We struggle to see a good way forward, a holy way out. Isaiah's audience did, too. I am not a romantic, and yet, by the grace of God (and many days **only** by the grace of God) I do have hope, especially when Isaiah reminds me that disruption and decimated stumps are among God's favorite materials to work with. God also seems astonishingly determined to work with and for a fickle and wayward people who have been known to whine in the wilderness and make cheap bargains with vengeful invaders and turn on one another and panic and gravitate toward the loudest and brashest voices out of fear. Yes, God gets fed up. Yes, God wants and expects and even demands better from us. And yes, God creates a world where a stump is not the end of the story, nor are our fickle and destructive ways. God may not be the author of the disruption; in fact, I think humanity has proven over the millennia that we are quite capable of disruption without any holy help. God is however the very one who can coax life from a dead end and build a people not

⁵ Isaiah 11:1, *The Voice*

with might or force but with and on the most tender of buds, bringing hope, justice, and peace through bull-headed and beloved people, and through a tiny shoot from a stump, as *The Voice* translation tells us:

And on this child from David's line, the Spirit of the Eternal One will alight and rest.

By the Spirit of wisdom and discernment

He will shine like the dew.

By the Spirit of counsel and strength

He will judge fairly and act courageously.

By the Spirit of knowledge and reverence of the Eternal One,

He will take pleasure in honoring the Eternal.

He will determine fairness and equity;

He will consider more than what meets the eye,

And weigh in more than what he's told.

So that even those who can't afford a good defense

will nevertheless get a fair and equitable judgment.

With just a word, He will end wickedness and abolish oppression.

With nothing more than the breath of His mouth, He will destroy evil.

He will clothe himself with righteousness and truth;

the impulse to right wrongs will be in his blood.⁶

And so, in the face of the most extreme disruption, I am still convinced that we have good reason to hope, because the God of our ancestors, the God who was and is and always will be remains steadfastly determined to coax new life for us and for all out of the deadest of dead ends and the most stubborn of stumps.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁶ Isaiah 11: 2-5, *The Voice*.