

Sermon, St. David's Episcopal Church, Advent 2, Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3:1-12 (*Elizabeth Felicetti*)

As many of you know, I am a giant fan of John the Baptist. Matthew's version is one of my favorites, with the camel hair and locusts and brood of vipers. But I am going to save a sermon about John for next Sunday, since we get two Sundays of John every Advent.

Instead, today, I feel called to talk about the eleventh chapter of Isaiah. I tend to think of this passage as the passage about The Peaceable Kingdom: the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid. Edward Hicks painted this scene many times, and you have probably seen some of his work on the subject. I'm pretty sure I've preached on the peaceable kingdom before. In such a polarizing world, I love images of strange bedfellows, of friends where we would not expect them. Like Justices Scalia and Ginsburg or Ulysses Grant and James Longstreet.

While pondering this passage, however, I realize that I tend to see only the peaceable kingdom and overlook other images, which can be a danger with beloved passages of scripture or even prayers from our liturgy. Tammy Shackelford touched on that in her Christ the King sermon, when she talked about ceremonial powers of England's monarchs and wondered if we are only paying ceremonial tribute to Christ when we pray. I strive to engage with our liturgy and scripture each time I open the prayer book or a Bible, so I tried to look beyond the peaceable kingdom, and there it was, right in the opening line: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse."

I have a hard time hearing that line as it appears because I tend to think of the branch of Jesse's tree, influenced by the hymn O Come O Come Emmanuel: "O Come though Branch of Jesse's tree." That was [will be] one of the lines we sang today, in fact. But in the first line of today's reading, it's not a tree: it's a stump. A stump is what's left over from what used to be a tree, before it fell over or was chopped down. A shoot sprang up from the stump. We have a stump between our house and the house next door. I can't remember why it had to be cut down, but I remember one of our neighbors gathering firewood from the felled tree. The stump is still there. Sometimes we set things on it, like bird seed.

But I haven't seen a shoot come out of it. A shoot coming out of a stump is a better image when describing Jesus than a branch of a tree, because it better foreshadows the crucifixion and resurrection. The resurrection isn't like a seed growing underground in the winter or other miraculous yet ordinary spring symbols. Jesus was literally dead, like a tree literally dies when it is chopped down, leaving only a stump.

Yet new life came. New life can spring forth from a stump, and Jesus sprang forth from the tomb.

The last three years have been really hard on churches: on churches around the world; on the Episcopal church in general; and on our church in particular. Advent has historically been a crowded time here, and while I don't get the same thrill from a crowd that I used to, I wonder if the church now is like new life springing up from a stump. We have a number of pregnant people and babies in our congregation, which speaks to Advent themes of waiting, of hope, of

anticipation. Will our church be a shoot from the stump of Jesse: a branch from the root of churches for the past two millennia? Churches have gotten so much wrong in the past centuries as well as recently. Jesus may have been perfect, but churches have never been perfect. Can we hope for new life? New growth?

In Advent, we await a baby, a messiah. Then more waiting: for him to grow. Then his public ministry, where he frustratingly taught in parables and didn't immediately overthrow the oppressive Roman government or, in the words of Anne Lamott, hate all the same people we hate.

Then his horrible execution, which he told his followers about, but they didn't listen, didn't believe. And then, resurrection. And now, we are waiting again, for his second coming.

What will that look like? What are you anticipating? What do you hope for? What could we do differently this time? What green shoot of new life can we notice and nurture today?