

## **The Second Sunday in Advent**

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Whack. Thump. Thump. Whack. The sound of children's laughter. And then Whack. Thump. On it went for hours. That is how I remember it. Beautiful and joyful sounds of childhood.

My Grandparents on my father's side lived in the tiny town of Red Rock, Iowa. It was a place that time seemed to forget. Where the Great Depression lingered. A tiny little place that spoke of subsistence. But to me, my brother, and our cousins, it seemed almost magical. Grandpa and Grandma had a chicken coop where we would gather eggs. It had an old pig pen and a barn. An old shed full of household items no longer used, a wash tub still used, and tools. There was a cave that Grandpa had dug into the hillside where vegetables and canned fruit were stored, and which was a cool retreat from the summer heat--if you could sneak through the door without being noticed. There was a hand-crank water pump that always needed to be primed before it would give up any water into the chipped enamel bucket. There was, of course, a two-hole outhouse that was, well, not so magical in any season.

Red Rock did not have many paved streets. Most were dirt. In the hot Iowa summers the sun-warmed dirt produced a couple of inches of very fine dust that wrapped your feet in a pleasant warmth that felt like the earth reaching up to share its love and embrace.

And, in the front yard, just inside the wire fence which separated the road from the yard, stood this majestic tree stump. It wasn't just any old stump. It stood at least six feet tall and had stubs of branches sticking out from the trunk. That stump just stood there and invited young kids to climb up into it. I wonder if Grandpa left it there for that reason.

Whack. Thump. The sound of kids beating and clawing on the stump with hammers and tools from the old shed with a determination to bring the stump down, trying to do the

impossible. But we never could. And, many years later, long after Grandpa and Grandma passed on, the stump was inundated with river water as a man-made lake flooded Red Rock.

That stump, although it provided hours of fun and laughter, and many fond memories, remained a lifeless stump. It never produced a shoot of any kind. It was not the “stump” of today’s reading from Isaiah and from which the prophet said, “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”

Our passage from Isaiah today is one of the most beloved readings of Advent. It is rich in hope and promise, portraying the coming of a new king from David’s lineage. Isaiah’s image of the shoot sprouting from the stump of Jesse speaks to God’s power to bring life from what seems barren.

So why is Isaiah referring to the “stump of Jesse”? Jesse is known as the father of King David, who made Israel a spiritual and political power. But by the time of Isaiah the once powerful and royal line of David had been reduced to a “stump,” cut down by exile, sin and human frailty. So, Isaiah is prophesying that from this lineage that has died out and lost its value, the Messiah will come. Then, 600 years later, from this humbled lineage, a bud blossoms — Jesus Christ.

Isaiah’s image of a stump might well describe the condition of our world today. The United Nations recently reported that more than 30,000 women and children have been killed in Gaza, and 1.2 million Gazans have become refugees. The “stump” could also describe some part of our own lives – the death of a loved one, sudden declining health, a broken relationship. A stump is something cut down, lifeless, and seemingly beyond renewal.

Israel must have appeared like such a stump to the prophet. Her monarchy had failed, and her people were in exile. Yet Isaiah speaks of a new shoot springing forth, symbolizing God’s power to bring life out of ruin. Could God really do that for Israel? It did not seem possible. Can God bring forth a new shoot from the “stump” of our lives?

That is the Advent hope. We wait for God to bring new life into a weary world – and into our own hearts – even in situations that seem hopeless. God has made a promise, and God is a Promise Keeper. The prophet reminds us that the new ruler will not judge by appearances – the usual measure of the world – but with righteousness, defending the poor and striking down oppression. Ours is not a passive waiting, but a longing for the day when all will live in God’s truth and love.

In Advent, the Church becomes both a sign and an instrument of that hope.

Advent is a season of waiting – but not idle waiting. Isaiah’s vision of the shoot springing from the stump of Jesse reminds us that God is always at work, even when life feels barren. Isaiah sees new life pushing through hard, dry ground. He promises that from Israel’s failed kingship, God will raise a new kind of king – one filled with the Spirit, ruling with justice, compassion, and peace. The line leading from David to the Promised One will rise from a stump once thought barren. Unlike the lifeless stump we kids beat and battered, this stump will produce the Messiah.

In today’s Gospel, John the Baptist cries out in the wilderness, calling people to prepare the way of the Lord: “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand.” He demands an immediate response. We must change to make room for God’s reign.

John is like a gardener turning the soil so that the new shoot Isaiah saw can grow.

The shoot of Jesse grows quietly, but it transforms everything. God’s reign begins in small acts of repentance, mercy, and reconciliation – in the places where we allow the Spirit, who dwells within us, to soften the hardened ground of our hearts. The ancient church, paraphrasing the message of John the Baptist, prayed: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.”

Advent is a season of hope – not the shallow kind that merely wishes things would get better, but a deep and quiet trust that God is working even when we cannot see how. We live in a world, both large and personal, that often feels like a field of stumps – war, animosity, moral confusion, and personal loss. These can leave us disheartened. Picture

an Advent banner in the sanctuary reading: “God has not finished with us yet.” From what looks barren, God can raise new life.

Can you hear the familiar voice calling to us this Second Sunday of Advent? It is John the Baptist calling to us with a message prophesied by Isaiah many years before: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” His cry is urgent and hopeful, reminding us that God’s coming is not far off or abstract. It is near – very near. The Message Bible says it this way: “Prepare for God. Make the road smooth and straight.” In other words, we need to remove all the obstacles to God in our lives and be ready for the coming of Christ.

But for God’s new life to take root, something must change within us. Advent is not merely a time for decorations and shopping. As good as those things may be, they can also distract us from what truly matters. We must clear away the clutter of our hearts, focus, and make room for Christ to enter.

Notice where we find John today – in the wilderness. In Scripture, the wilderness is the place where God speaks to a wandering people: freed from slavery, yet unsure where they are going. It is there that they learn to depend on God day by day. The wilderness strips away false securities and distractions, teaching the heart to listen.

When we are quiet, and when we listen carefully, we can hear John calling out to each of us: “Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.” This week, and for the remainder of Advent, let us pray that as we anticipate the coming of the Lord, we may see what in our life is an obstacle to our preparation for the Lord’s coming. We can use the ancient prayer: “Come, Holy Spirit, fill the hearts of your faithful, and kindle in them the fire of your love.” And then, as we are changed, the path between us and God will become smoother and straighter.

Advent is a time to make things new. So, let’s help a new shoot grow out of our former self.

Let us heed the call of John the Baptist: “Repent. The kingdom of God is near!”