

Sermon 19.12.08

Isaiah 11: 1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

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.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of
him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.' This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

'The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

"Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight." '

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, 'You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, "We have Abraham as our ancestor"; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe 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 baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

SERMON

This fall I was out cleaning up the fence that marks the border between my property and that of my neighbor. Derek came out and we began talking about trees. I told him I hoped to plant some fruit or nut trees and asked if he was interested as well, because some types of trees require more than one to pollinate and produce fruit. He suggested planting a mulberry. Plant a mulberry, on purpose? Please, anything but a mulberry I said.

You see, I have an aversion to mulberry trees. I love their fruit, it makes a delicious jam, but they are prolific sprouters and a bugger to get rid of. I have battled them, and fear I've come out the loser. On our farm in Lancaster we planted a large asparagus patch - enough to wholesale. Asparagus is an amazing plant - asparagus spears grow straight out of the ground. An asparagus patch is most productive when kept clean of growth, because one day the ground is bare, the next day the asparagus shoot appears, and if it's warm enough, it's ready to harvest the next day. An asparagus patch produces for 20 or so years, so while it takes patience to get a patch up and going, once the roots are well established, they give and give. And, they require work. They need to be weeded, tended, cared for over time. Life got ahead of me on the farm, and there were years where our patch got little more than a healthy dose of manure spread on it late in the winter and almost no weeding.

Not the best way to keep production going.

We mowed the patch as a way of keeping the weeds from taking over, but that only made things like the mulberry trees stronger. Cut off the top and it will send up shoots. Lots of shoots. One spring I decided to try to rid the patch of mulberry trees. I quickly learned that trying to get them out with a shovel wasn't going to work, so I found a big, thick chain in the barn that I attached to the Big Red Monster - our Massey Ferguson tractor, and figured I'd pull them out. What a sight I must have been! I wound the chain around one of the mulberrys, trying to get it around the main stem, and slowly began to back out the tractor. Over and over I wound that chain, each time it pulling off leaves and branches, but those roots wouldn't budge. I got a few mulberry trees out of the asparagus patch that spring, but there were plenty that were so deeply rooted that they were there to stay. All I could do was cut back the stump as deeply as I could, cut the shoots year after year, and try to keep them from spreading.

So please, I told my neighbor, let's find something else to plant...

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

Stumps - they can look dead, be cut down, and still shoots appear.

I asked my brother-in law, Bob, a master arborist, about stumps and shoots while staying with them after Thanksgiving. What an education I got!

You see, I thought stumps were what was left after a tree was cut down, just an annoying thing that hung around until it finally died and rotted away. I saw stumps as a problem, something to mow around, something to dig up and get rid of. Stumps and the shoots they produced were nothing but a headache in my book.

So when I read - "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots" I think of the stump being a lifeless, useless thing in the way.

But the ancients - those who lived in the time of Isaiah, would have known better.

Throughout history, our ancestors knew how to tend trees and woodlands in ways that have been forgotten by most in our modern era. Cutting trees back, purposefully, to create stumps and shoots is a way of increasing the longevity of a tree and a way to produce all sorts of useful things. In his book *Sprout Lands*, botanist William Bryant Logan writes that once, farmers knew how to prune and manage their trees, making things like tree-branch hay to feed their livestock, they knew how to cut their trees back to stumps and harvest shoots that were straight, strong and flexible, suitable for weaving into roofs and watertight baskets. No place could prosper, Logan says, without its inhabitants knowing how to cut their trees so they would sprout again. **Pruning the trees, cutting them back to their roots, didn't destroy them. Rather, it created the healthiest, most sustainable and most diverse woodlands that we have ever known.**

In one of the final chapters of the book he begins with Isaiah 11:1 - "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

Trees are functionally immortal, he writes.¹ They don't necessarily die, they improvise new life from the old. The Israelites would have known this. They would have known that stumps that look dead, that have been cut back to the root, can still rise again - they can thrive and bear much from the shoots they send forth.

What hope those who heard this proclamation from Isaiah would have found! New life, abundant, sustaining life, will come from those places that appear dead.

As I read and pondered these trees that appear dead and yet bounce back, growing, flourishing, producing new life - producing, in the words of the prophet, one who will one day judge with righteousness, one who will bring a life of such abundance that the lion and the lamb will lie down together. When I read of the extravagant promises of God- promises of a leader, a Savior, growing out of the cut down and chopped off places in our world, the word resilience kept coming to mind.

Resilience is the process of adapting, living, even flourishing in the face of adversity, tragedy, or significant loss. Resiliency means "bouncing back" from difficult experiences. Research has shown that resilience is ordinary, it's something we are all capable of and most of us do.² We become resilient through the hardships - through the moments that cut us down - when we are pruned and look like there's no life left in us. When the book of Isaiah was written, the Israelites were living in just such a time. It's hard to know if the writer of Isaiah was speaking of an actual king that would save his people, or a vision for a king in some unspecified future who embody the ideal. It really doesn't matter. Isaiah proclaims some really good news for a people who have cried out 'when, when will you bring righteousness, defend the poor, deliver the needy? When will you make harmonious creation? When will your love, mercy, and justice rule us? *God, what are you waiting for?*'

¹ Logan, William Bryant. 2019. *Sprout Lands: Tending the Endless Gift of Trees*. Norton Press.

² <https://www.apa.org/helpcenter/road-resilience>

What, God, are you waiting for? We can't see the long view very easily. We are frustrated that justice is not here. Where is this new life in our world – this peaceable kingdom? We don't see it. We see only stumps. Maybe we see shoots, but from the trees that have been felled.

These words of Isaiah present unqualified good news. Whether in this world and history or beyond, they cry joyfully that God desires - and one day will bring about - justice and peace for the world and all its living creatures.

Good news that one day, God knows when, justice and peace will prevail. For those long ago, it was a time of leaning on hope. Resilience is built on that hope.

For new life to sprout from dead places, materially or spiritually, resilience is needed. Stumps are signs of resilience. The small shoots that appear, that come out of the sides, that burst forth from the cut down places – this is possible in each of us. These small signs of life, the shoots, are examples of God at work in us.

Resilience isn't extra-ordinary, being resilient is an ordinary part of being human. What helps build resilience? Connection is the number one factor in being a resilient person. Connection to God, connection to one another.

Resilience is learning how to spring back. It involves being cut down, cut back. It's when we're wounded that we become strong. It's when we stay connected to God and to one another that we are strong. It was out of the stump that our Savior has come. Out of a stump, not out of a planted and tended tree, but out of that which was cut back. Jesus came from the stump of Jesse - from a people who had been cut back again and again. Learning this about the productivity and resilience of trees that are cut back to the root makes me wonder about the way we read John's words to the Pharisees and Sadducees -

Even now the axe 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.

The parts of the tree that don't bear good fruit are cut down and thrown away, but what about the roots? If the roots are connected to the source of Life, might they send up shoots, new life?

For stumps to continue to produce - to send up shoots, they require a strong, healthy root system. Sometimes shoots grow as tall as the original tree. That means the roots are nourished, well connected, healthy. Is your root system healthy? When you are cut back, what is the source out of which new life springs?

If we read Jesus as the fulfillment of the Isaiah passage, the shoot that grew out of the stump that had been cut down and sent into exile - beaten back, cut down again and again, what does that mean for us, in this place and time?

Before we look for the new shoots, the signs of life, we need to make sure our roots are strong, healthy, vibrant - like those mulberry trees that were so firmly rooted in the earth that they would not budge - even with thick chains tugging at them.

What holds your roots firm? It's the roots that keep us resilient, able to produce new life.

Where are the metaphorical roots, deeply connected that allow for shoots of new life in our world today?

I recently read a blog post in the Mennonite about the village of Nallu, Nepal - a place where most of the houses were destroyed in the earthquake that hit in April 2015, where 9,000 people were killed and hundreds of thousands of people became homeless overnight.

The author stood with a Nepali couple, Shanti and Krishna, beside their new home. The crumbling rubble of their old house perched on the hillside above. With government assistance, their own savings, and some additional funding help from Mennonite Central Committee (MCC), Shanti and Krishna, along with almost 200 other families in this community, were able to rebuild their houses after the earthquake.

The traditional mud and stone construction is now replaced with a higher ratio of cement, making the houses stronger, more resilient to the tremors that continue to be felt..

When asked how his family managed to survive after the earthquake, Krishna said in Nepali, it was "arma parma," everyone helping each other, a part of the traditional way. Arma Parma -

everyone helping each other. Shoots that sprung up from this place that was cut down - love, resilience, allowed the villagers of Nallu to find new life.

What allowed such a partnership and rebuilding to happen? Relationships, trust, hope. Mennonite Central Committee had been working in the village of Nallu for years before the earthquake hit. They supported one another, growing, tending relationships that allowed for trusting partnerships to bring hope, new life, new homes out of the rubble of destruction.³

Arma Parma - everyone helping each other: love, resilience, relationships. They take time, they require tending, like new shoots coming up from dead stumps. Time, investment in each other, in tending to one another is what is needed for all of us.

What connects you to our source of love? In what do your roots sink deeply to find the nourishment to send up new shoots, when you might feel cut back?

Arma Parma - tending to one another, helping one another.

What are you waiting for, God? Are you waiting for us?

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(https://themennonite.org/we-are-all-here-in-nepal/?utm_source=TMail&utm_campaign=557c4abf82-EMAIL_CAMPAIGN_2019_12_02_01_37&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_710b2b7199-557c4abf82-96750033)