

Isaiah 11:1-10
Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13
Matthew 3:1-12

I like yard work. I just don't like the yard to tell me when it is time for me to get out there and do something, like trim bushes or pick up leaves. Along one fence line we have a row of saplings, ON THE OTHER SIDE. Periodically I try to cut them off at the ground, only to see shoots coming out of the stump a few months later, if that long. You think you killed the diabolical young tree, only to see it mocking you later with those shoots. Those stumps that appear dead are not dead. There is a lot of life under the ground in that tree. This stump is another one of Isaiah's metaphors, a metaphor for hope, a theme we continue from last Sunday.

Advent, the season we are celebrating now, is a season of hope. Advent looks back to when God fulfilled God's promise for a Messiah, the Christ Child, the Babe of Bethlehem. We look forward to Christ coming again, when all of creation will be redeemed. Last Sunday Isaiah used the metaphor of God's mountain, a mountain to which all of the nations will stream; a mountain that will be an effective United Nations. The nations will for there they know that they will experience the well-being, equality, justice, and peace that only God can offer.

It is as though Isaiah cannot stop himself from proclaiming hope for now Isaiah provides Judah, provides us, with another metaphor of hope, a stump. The stump is not dead; a shoot will sprout. It is a stump bursting with life. A stump bursting with hope. Having been conquered by the Babylonians with much of their land devastated by the warfare and many of the people taken away to live in exile, it created a faith crisis, for where was God in all of this? Had God abandoned them? Yes, the house of King David had fallen like a tree. But, also like a tree, a new shoot will grow from the stump of

Jesse. Jesse was David's father. A new shoot will come from the Davidic lineage. There is hope for Israel. There is hope for us.

Isaiah's portrayal of this new leader born of David's lineage explains why it is reasonable hope: the very Spirit of God rests on his shoulders. He is infused with God's own "wisdom and understanding," "counsel and might," "knowledge and the fear of the Lord." This is not another Hillary or Trump; not another politician who will disappoint us. As great as David was, the hope that God will renew Judah, and us, is not limited to the Davidic line, but is rooted in the new life that the spirit of God makes possible. God does not lead with the faltering, fallible wisdom of an ordinary person. God embodies and brings about divine justice. Under his watch the poor and the meek are lifted up. There is no room for evil and oppression; on this mountain, even the predators are peaceful.

There is no doubt that Isaiah paints an idyllic picture. As Jill Duffield, the editor of *The Presbyterian Outlook* wrote, "The beauty of this vision is breathtaking, expansive hard to imagine. The poor will be judged with righteousness, there will be equity for the meek, the wolf will die down with the lamb." But when we hear those words, the Kingdom of God doesn't seem near at all. When we hear these words of an idyllic picture, we may respond, "Yeah, right. When pigs fly." Idyllic yes, fantasy no. This is not a pie-in-the-sky-when-you-die type message.

Katherine Pershey, a minister in the Congregational Church, reminds us that this Scripture belongs first to the Jewish people. She shares a story about Rabbi Margaret Wenig who identified places where God fulfilled this promise in Jewish history. One of her stories is particularly moving. There was a group of Austrian Jews who had survived the horrors of the concentration camp of Buchenwald, where it was estimated that at

least 56,000 prisoners were murdered. When these Austrian Jews had been imprisoned in that living hell, they dreamed of settling in Palestine and starting a kibbutz. Death was all around. And yet, these prisoners dreamed. A kibbutz was a collective community in Israel and were a combination of socialism and Zionism. Initially they were based on agriculture. The land in Palestine is not good agricultural land. It is very rocky and it took a community to farm the land. I always laugh when in Scripture I read the description of Israel as a land of milk and honey. Believe me, it is far from it. But these kibbutzim have been successful communities. They have been peaceful communities that still exist, sustaining families for generations. The name of the particular kibbutz that these Austrian Jews founded is Netzer, which means “shoot”—as in “A shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse.” From the dead stump of a Nazi concentration camp they could imagine a shoot arising. Their life is a witness to Isaiah’s prophecy, a sign of God’s faithfulness to God’s promises.

Signposts pointing to transformations are sprouting up like—well shoots from the stump of Jesse. Political scientists looking at both the present geo-political realities as well as cultural developments, argue that future wars are becoming less probable - for five reasons. Here's a quick review:

- 1) Aging. The graying of societies may mean fewer wars in the future. With proportionally fewer young people to spare, many countries may be less willing to put their youth in harm's way to defend national interests.

- 2) Technology. Future conflicts may be limited to disrupting electronic targets rather than killing humans.

3) Economics. The globalization of the economy may reduce the threat of war because multinational corporations, with extensive facilities all over the world, have too much to lose.

4) Cultural change. Telecommunication allows people to work and make friends in multiple locations, including multiple countries. And migrants have increasing political and economic influence both in the countries they leave and in the countries they enter.

5) Trends in government. Future world governance will be "multicentered," rather than controlled by a single entity. Nation-states in perpetual conflict will wither away.

Perhaps the wolf does not yet lie down with the lamb, but glimmers of peace do surface, even in the midst of danger and despair. God has revealed to us God's alternative vision for the world. As the people of God we have seen God's alternative reality. Signposts of that transformation are sprouting up like shoots from the stump of Jesse. Have you seen the Amazon commercial that features a priest and an imam. They are having tea with each other. They both send a Christmas gift, gifts appropriate for two older men who kneel for liturgical reasons: knee pads. It would be easy to be a bit cynical about that commercial. Oh, it was just a political statement by Amazon. Maybe so, but Amazon started work on this ad months before the anti-Muslim rhetoric of the election. It would be easy to be a bit cynical for, after all, they were actors. It was acting. But the two actors are real religious leaders! The priest is played by Gary Bradley, vicar at St Mary's and Paddinton Green in London, and Zubier Mohammad, principal of the Muslim School Oadby in Leicester. The scenes were filmed in two

churches, St. Dunstan and All saints Stepney Church in London, and the East London Mosque. Amazon consulted with the Interfaith Alliance, the National Council of Churches, and the Islamic Circle of North America, to insure the ad was respectful. Respect. Something we do not see much of today. Something of which we need more. Respect for people of other faiths. Something we do not see much of today. Something of which we need more. An understanding that most Muslims are not terrorists, but people of God! A glimmers of peace, of hope. Could it be that the wolf will live with the lamb.

Blessed be the name of the Lord forever;
may the glory of God fill the earth. Amen.