

THAT VULNERABLE FUTURE
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University Congregational Church
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Reading: Isaiah 11: 1-10 (NEB)

Then a shoot shall grow from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall spring from his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and power, a spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what he sees nor decide by what he hears; he shall judge the poor with justice and defend the humble in the land with equity; his mouth shall be a rod to strike down the ruthless, and with a word he shall slay the wicked. Round his waist he shall wear the belt of justice, and good faith shall be the girdle round his body. Then the wolf shall live with the sheep, and the leopard lie down with the kid; the calf and the young lion shall grow up together, and a little child shall lead them; the cow and the bear shall be friends, and their young shall lie down together. The lion shall eat straw like cattle; the infant shall play over the hole of the cobra, and the young child dance over the viper's nest. They shall not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain; for as the waters fill the sea, so shall the land be filled with the knowledge of the Lord. On that day a scion from the root of Jesse shall set up a signal to the peoples; the nations shall rally to it, and its resting-place shall be glorious.

On the second Sunday of Advent, Christian Churches around the world have read this lectionary reading. The lectionary is a three-year cycle of scripture readings that congregations are encouraged to follow every Sunday morning. The readings include the Hebrew Bible, the Psalms, New Testament letter, and a gospel reading. Not every denomination follows the lectionary. I do not always follow the lectionary but I look at it to see if it offers any inspiration for preaching.

Isaiah always inspires me, but I read a very similar passage on this image of God's reign a few weeks ago. This morning's reading is used frequently and offers one of the finest images of God's shalom one could ever hope to imagine. When I read it I wonder that we ever need another conversation about the Kingdom of God. Why do we go around with our fingers in our ears as if we never heard of this before? What is God's peace like? Read Isaiah 11: 1-10.

Yet, for some reason we need to be reminded of it over and over again. We have to hear every day of our lives the vision of our faith and the future God promises us. Is there something wrong with our hearing? Or are we like the new minister standing at the church door greeting the members as they left the Sunday morning service. Most of the people were very generous telling the new minister how much they liked his message, except for one man who said, "This was a very dull and boring sermon, pastor."

A few minutes later, the same man again appeared in line and said, "I don't think you did much preparation for your message."

After a few more parishioners passed by the minister the same man appeared, this time muttering, "You really blew it. You didn't have a thing to say, pastor."

Finally, the minister could stand it no longer. He went to one of the deacons and inquired about the man.

"Oh, don't let that guy bother you," said the deacon. "He's a little slow. All he does is go around repeating whatever he hears other people saying."¹

What is often lost in the reading and preaching of this text is the literary context. This prophetic utterance of Isaiah has two bookends. The reading begins and ends with mention of the stock of Jesse. Jesse was the father of David. This is a reference to the lineage of King David. Out of this old stump of a family a kingdom long in disrepair will re-emerge. A new heir will usher in the rule of God. Many conservative Christians believe that Isaiah was predicting the coming of Christ, which is why this is often read during Advent. But Isaiah never had such a thought. Eight

¹ Adapted. Source of this story is unknown. Found at <http://www.swapmeetdave.com/Humor/Religious.html>, downloaded 12/3/10.

centuries before the birth of Jesus, Isaiah was concerned that his country was about to collapse under the weight of moral degeneracy and unethical political collusion. The nation will fall, he predicted, because every institution – religious, commercial, judicial, and social – too easily compromised with the greed of power. The people were more interested in personal gain, the nation be damned.

What has been lost in today's reading is the moral reckoning that Isaiah cast upon Israel. He complained in the previous chapter that the poor had been deprived of justice, the weakest people were robbed of their rights, and the orphaned and widowed had been plundered. The bottom line is that because both the Assyrians, who were overwhelming the nation, and the people of Israel had forsaken the common good. The prophet declared both will be brought to ruin. Disease and famine are just two consequences of social and political disease. And the few verses just before the ones I read earlier state:

“Look, the Lord, the Lord of Hosts, cleaves the trees with a flash of lightning, the tallest are hewn down, the lofty laid low, the heart of the forest is felled with the axe, and Lebanon with its noble trees has fallen.” (Is. 10: 33-34)

The arboretum will be shattered. The botanical gardens smashed. Every tree and shrub will look like Kansas after a tornado. I once lived in the Blue Ridge Mountains where we had a severe ice storm. All through the night you could hear the tops of trees and branches snapping and thumping to the ground. When we woke up in the morning the aroma of pine burdened the air. We looked out over the valley and it appeared like a field of bare toothpicks. Isaiah declares that this is the fate of dishonorable nations.

Isaiah's announcement that the future will sprout from the stock of Jesse takes on a new meaning. Out of the ashes of corruption and judgment new life will sprout. In the midst of destruction, whether sacred or secular, a new root will take hold and push itself up out of the moldering soil.

When the city is laid to waste with not a building standing; when the refugees have fled and their camps are overcrowded; when cholera slips into the drinking water cramping muscles with vomiting and diarrhea; when children are crying for food, then it is that hope claws down into the earth and taps a root. A new green and tender sprout lifts its head out of the flotsam and carnage. Its leaves flutter in the wind, snapping out hope. Out of the ashes a promise for the future is given.

An E5 tornado cut through Greensburg, KS, in 2007, leveling 95% of the town, killing 12 people. Since that devastation Greensburg is rebuilding with sustainable homes and offices. It has become a model for green architecture and building. Out of the rubble a new town is emerging for the entire world to marvel at.

When Sherman torched Atlanta in 1864, he also ordered the burning of crops and the slaughter of all farm animals. Who could image that Atlanta would become the major commercial hub of the southeastern United States, with the busiest airport in the nation?

Every day women and men crawl out from the wreckage of marriages, the chaff of failed business ventures, and the remnants of worn friendships. Service men and women from every battle ever fought must tap a root in the recrement of lost limbs, traumatic brain injuries, paralysis, and PTSD. Families often suffer the loss of

loved ones, children and mates who died too soon. None of them deserved to suffer as deeply as they did. Now those who survive wonder what to do with all of those ashes.

Isaiah told the promise of a new future. Across the cultures and religions of the world people cling to such a promise. Persians, Greeks, Romans, Egyptians, Phoenicians, and Assyrians all held in common the myth of the phoenix rising from the cinders. There is even a Chinese version. In England there is a twelfth century document called the *Aberdeen Bestiary*, with a written and illustrated account of the purple and golden Phoenix rising up of its sacrificial ashes.

Well, there is nothing like a romp through time but, so what? Is there anything we can possibly take from these vignettes of destruction and resurrection?

The first lesson is perhaps the hardest of them all. It seems to be in the will of God that nations suffer the consequences of corruption and moral apostasy. When the common good is ignored to the detriment of ordinary people the nation will rot. When shared values are sold to the highest bidder in the halls of justice the nation will erode. When the quest for political power comes at the expense of citizens and the security of other nations, violence is inevitable. Other religions call this karma. Some philosophers call it fate. Christianity calls it judgment.

Tragically, the whole nation suffers. The young and innocent are not spared the consequences of corrupt institutions. We may live out our private lives with uncommon dignity and empathy. Friends, family, and co-workers think of us as moral standard bearers. We may have a deep and abiding faith in the love of God and serve our church with uncommon dedication. But we will not be spared the pain that the

nation brings upon itself. The greatest temptation in times like these is the forfeiture of our moral agency and compassion.

Even if we lived in a moral society we would still be vulnerable to all kinds of natural disasters and diseases. Accidents happen all of the time and there is no one or god to blame. Disease, old age, and death are the regular phenomena of life. Hurricanes, tornados, drought, flood, and pestilence have long plagued human beings. Regardless of the quality of our moral agency and the depths of our faith we are all vulnerable. As the wonderfully provocative psychoanalyst, James Hillman, once stated, “From the moment we are conceived we are old enough to die.”

Now I think there are actually some clues here about the nature of God, especially as we consider the expected birth of the Messiah. The root of Jesse springs forward out of death, fear, uncertainty, and improbability. That is to say, God emerges out of the least likely circumstances and the most fragile conditions.

Stop right there! Did you hear that? We have tried for two thousand years to announce the birth of the Savior with pomp and circumstance. The birth of a child to an unwed teenaged peasant girl has been magnified and glorified. We have scrubbed up the scene with a host of angels, imperial magi, the drummer boy, and a hallelujah chorus. It almost makes it seem triumphant. We wrapped it all up in the package and bow of “wonderful counselor, the prince of peace” and so on. With all of the glitter, and let’s throw in a jolly, “Ho, ho, ho,” the risk, the danger, and frailty of God is lost to us.

Stop again! There is a flag on the play. Opposing team members are calling for a personal foul on the preacher. What is the foul? I am suggesting that if God

entered the world and the “Word became flesh” through the poor little family of Mary and Joseph, God took a huge gamble. God staked his reputation of invincibility to become the deity of vulnerability. God shed the mantle of omnipotence only to take up the robe and sandals of the Fisher of men and women. God exchanged the royal scepter and mitre for the hammer and saw of the Carpenter. God left behind the title of “King of Kings and Lord of Lords” for that of Suffering Servant.

If what I am saying is true, then we ought to look for God in the out of the way places. Don’t look for God riding a white stallion across the plains to save us. God is not Gandalf, or the Lone Ranger, or Wonder Woman, or Superman. Don’t pin your hopes on the cavalry. Ask Custer. When you have been dealt a devastating blow look among the shards and ashes for a little sprout. When life has been cruel and your neighbors mean scratch around the residue of loss for a sprig of renewal. When your trunk is broken and the leaves sheared away watch for that little leaf unfurling from the most inconspicuous and improbable branch.

Many years ago my late father-in-law, Ernie Leo, ran over a newly planted Ash tree. The mower cut the sapling to the ground. Everyone assumed that was the end of the tree. Today that tree is nearly thirty feet high with two strong trunks. It is absolutely beautiful. Grandchildren climbed it for the adventure of imagination. Old folks sat under its shade to talk quietly of memory as they swing little ones to sleep. The house has been sold and remodeled. The new commercial owners have preserved the tree because it is so kind to the eyes.

We all love to sing the glorious Christmas hymns and process to the songs of Easter’s victory. But don’t let the ceremony fool you. It means nothing if it does not

lift up the humble origins of grace. If the songs of the church avoid the stable and sidesteps the grave be warned it is not of God. Run away from that parade as quickly as possible. If the prayers of the church and the preacher's sermon never touch on vulnerability – yours and God's – you are in the wrong pew.

The hope that we are looking for in Advent is the incredible faith that God finds us when we are the most vulnerable, weak, and broken. When we least expect it, when we do not deserve it the most, when we are reduced to ashes, a sapling of God's love rises up to meet us where we are. Let me show you the way of God's love.

The story takes place in a tired northern city. The registered nurse is making her final rounds before her shift ends. She finds Mr. Rosenberg all alone in his private room. He has been fighting cancer for years and every treatment has been tried to no avail. Mr. Rosenberg is in palliative care but still conscious of his circumstances. He never has visitors, and has no family to check on him. The nurse notices that there are no flowers or cards in the room. He is weeping. She stands beside him and asks if there is any thing that she can do for him. He replies, "No. I have no family and I am just afraid of dying alone."

The R.N. returns to the nurse's station, completes her charting, and briefs the late shift. She clocks out and then returns to Mr. Rosenberg's room. He is still tearful and his tiny shoulders shutter with fear. The nurse climbs up onto his bed and brings the blankets up to the old man's neck. She slips her left arm under his neck and brings him close to her. His head rests on her shoulder. The warmth of her compassion stills the fear. He falls asleep and dies before sunrise. But he does not die alone. And I dare say unto you, he dies in the everlasting arms of God's grace.

Mary Oliver wrote:

We shake with joy, we shake with grief.
What a time they have, these two
housed as they are in the same body.²

I doubt if there is anyone in this room who has not got mud on their feet,
tripping as we do through moral collapse, death, and betrayal. Indeed, we shake with
grief. In that same body lie the ripples of joy, waiting for the right sun and the gentle
kiss of rain to bless the seeds of life.

Isaiah teaches us this morning that when everything seems to be in ruin and
hope beyond repair, keep your eyes open for the blade of life that springs from the
dross. Look for God in smoke and ash.

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² Mary Oliver, “We Shake with Joy,” *Evidence* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2009), p. 13.