



Roanoke, Virginia

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“Prepare”

Part II of the Sermon Series “While We Are Waiting”

Isaiah 11:1-10

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Isaiah 11:1-10.

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

² 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.

³ 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;

⁴ 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.

⁵ Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶ 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.

⁷ The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

⁸ The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ 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.

When my husband Chris and I first bought our house, there was an overgrown line of forsythia in our front yard. It took up a good seven or eight foot wide strip in an already small space between our house and our next-door neighbor. So, as soon as the weather was warm enough, we set to the tedious work of removing the overgrown hedge. Using our truck and a chain, we slowly wrapped the base of each plant and put the trunk in drive until the roots gave way. (We may have looked a little redneck to our new neighbors, but I have to say it was a far site be easier than digging those huge root balls out by hand!)

Not long after we started, however, we discovered where a tree had been—or, I should say, where a tree was trying to grow. In the thick of those first few forsythia, we found a dead, round-up painted stump. And then, out of its side, a tall, spindly redbud branch reaching up for sunlight. With the neighbor's help, we guessed the tree had been cut down some eight or ten years before, at least. And there it was—a tree growing out of the stump. The most recent owners had thought it was dead—actually, they may not have even known it was there amidst all the brambles. But it was growing, despite all odds.

Have you ever seen something growing where nothing should be? A weed poking up out of a crack in a sidewalk, a vine growing up through the post of a stop sign in Old SW. My parents recently shared a photo from their trip to Lake Michigan this fall—a tree growing on top of solid rock, its roots stretched across a crevice to soil on the other side.

It's a remarkable thing to see. Life where it should not be; a root still viable.

Some seven centuries before Jesus' birth, a poet writes of a future day of peace. Isaiah's context is not some safe and beautiful home, some pastoral and peaceful land, but utter destruction. Between 740 and 700 BCE, the Assyrian army wreaked havoc and destruction in the northern kingdom of Israel. Isaiah sees all of this as judgement for their faithlessness. The kingdom's leaders had looked not to God, but instead supported the rich and the powerful becoming more rich and more powerful at the expense of the poor and marginalized.ⁱ



So, destruction, deportation, occupation by this foreign government. When the people Israel read Isaiah 11, they read it with hope that a new king would rise up among them to restore their nation. Later, King Hezekiah seemed to fit the bill. He was a good king. Hezekiah sought God's wisdom, judged the poor with righteousness, and decided with fairness. He instituted important reforms, but fell short in bringing the promised peace Isaiah envisions.

And so, hundreds of years later, the community found themselves again living under the threat of an occupying force, perhaps even worse than the Assyrians. The Romans and their puppet regimes inflicted injustice and violence on the people. When Israel read Isaiah 11 in this context, they looked for yet another king. They read and prayed and prepared for the coming of a Messiah, a Savior that would be a great king like David, son of Jesse...

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

“Even when it looks like everything is burnt over,” Isaiah says, “like nothing could grow, a shoot will spring forth – hope will grow.”

Israel was so used to being compared to a vine, growing with branches upon branches intertwined. It may not sound like much, but a branch, a shoot, Isaiah is saying, is enough. The root, the foundation is still good. God still makes way for life, for a future.

Most of us have experienced loss on some scale or another. As your pastor, you have graciously invited me to sit alongside many of you in moments of grief, fear, and anxiety—in hospital rooms, at bedsides, on long walks, and here in this sanctuary. And the beauty of our relationship as pastor and parishioner is that I also get to see resurrection over and over again.

- A man who thought he'd never find joy after the death of a beloved spouse, opens himself to new people and relationships.
- A parent who's experienced the excruciating loss of a child returns to worship and despite grief and pain and doubt finds new meaning in service.
- A woman who felt belittled and judged by her childhood church, somehow finds the strength to open herself to a new community to ask questions and explore God's word in a whole new way.
- A son who is honest about who he is, and a family that grows to not only accept him but to advocate for him.

The list could go on.

From the outside, these signs of hope may not look like much—a shoot coming out of a stump, a branch springing forth from a root, a step forward, an opening, a light—but it's enough, Isaiah says. Sometimes, that's all it takes.



But seeing such a sign of hope doesn't always come naturally to us. So we have to watch, get ready for it, pay attention for when it comes. Isaiah's Israel would never be the same. It would never rise again. The shoot may never be a mighty cedar. But it will be stubborn and tenacious. It will appear, whether we're ready or not.

Into this world, a Son will be born to a poor family. His entrance will be small, noticed by a few poor shepherds and foreigners following a star. He and his family will have to flee a puppet king's horrible decree. He will be hated by those who can't imagine something good can grow out of something that looks so burnt over. He will be persecuted for touching the outcast and eating with sinners. From the outside, he may not look like much, but he will be the Messiah the world has been waiting for.

So, prepare your hearts, people of much faith and people of little. Look for life in these Advent days of darkness and unexpected light. May we be ready when he comes.

¹ Cory Driver, "Commentary on Isaiah 11:1-10" for Dec 4, 2022. www.Workingpreacher.org.

