

Green Hill Presbyterian Church
“Dreaming a Future”
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Advent 2--December 8, 2019

Lessons: Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

When we lived in Baltimore, there was a box elder tree at the end of our driveway. It was the kind of tree where the leaves did not fall gradually in the autumn. Instead, when it was time for them to fall, they all fell at once, usually right on top of one of our cars. We thought of it as a trash tree and I was not particularly upset when it was decided to cut that tree down. No longer did we have to deal with all those leaves, and we bought a nice bucket to place on the stump with flowers growing in that bucket during the summer. It all was much nicer than the tree had been. But the tree wasn't finished. On a regular basis, shoots would come out of the stump and as far as I know there might be a box elder tree growing again at the back of that driveway. The tree did not give up.

Isaiah speaks about the shoot that shall come out from the stump of Jesse and the branch that shall grow out of his roots. Jesse was the father of David, the great king, and when David ruled Israel all seemed right. Those were the good old days. But now Israel was cut off. The great tree that was Jesse was cut down by the Babylonians and humiliated by the Assyrians, and a great many people thought this was the end for the people of Israel. Jesse was now only a stump; cut down and with no future, but stumps have a way of being far more alive than they look. To a people who felt cut off, lacking a future, Isaiah dreams of a future where the Spirit of the Lord will rest on our ruler, and that ruler will judge the poor with righteousness and the meek with equity. Isaiah dreams of a future where 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. For a people who had seen their tree cut down, this message is a reminder that the tree isn't finished.

It is not surprising that this image is one of the better known and more popular images in Scripture. Wouldn't it be wonderful if the world were like that? Wouldn't it be great if wolves really lived with lambs? Wouldn't it be wonderful if we knew we didn't have to worry about bears wandering around Trolley Square because they would be grazing with cows? In a world that is altogether too full of violence and division, we yearn for a time when there will be no hurting or destroying on all God's holy mountain and where the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

This is a vision for all of us in our world today. Amidst so many stumps that seem dried up and dead, cut down with no signs of life, in fact shoots are springing forth; branches are growing up. Look for them. Gene Bay who used to be pastor at Bryn Mawr Presbyterian Church suggests that when we read this passage from Isaiah, of course “we think of Jesus. Not merely because it is said of him that he descended from the house of David. We think of him because he arose from such an unlikely place, a stump-like place. He came from Nazareth, of which it was said, ‘Can anything good come out of Nazareth?’ We think of Jesus because ‘the Spirit of the Lord’ did rest upon him, because he did not ‘judge by what his eyes saw),’ because his delight was ‘in the fear of the Lord,’ and because ‘righteousness’ was ‘the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.’ Perhaps we think of Jesus, as well, because we sense that if we ever did really listen to him, if we ever did really do as he says, if ever we were not satisfied just to worship him but really and truly began to follow him,

then maybe it would be as Isaiah imagines, and the wolf and the lamb would be able to lie down together...and the Israelis and the Palestinians, the Christians and the Muslims, the Democrats and the Republicans, even the conservative Presbyterians and the liberal Presbyterians!...and 'they (would) not hurt or destroy' anywhere on God's good earth."¹

That is God's dream for our world and through Isaiah we are invited to join in that dream, that together with our God we might dream a whole new future. God is not finished with all the broken, cut down, cut off places in our lives and our world. Shoots are growing forth.

There is another prophet in our scripture today. His name is John and John is more confrontational than Isaiah seems. "Repent," he says and all of us get a little nervous. Most people would prefer to proclaim the importance of repentance for other people than to recognize just how much we ourselves need to repent. That is part of what it means to prepare the way of the Lord. When new people join the church we ask of them: Trusting in the gracious mercy of God, do you turn from the ways of sin and renounce evil and its power in the world? Do you turn to Jesus Christ and accept him as your Lord and Savior, trusting in his grace and love? That turning from evil and turning towards God is an act of repentance. The Greek word behind the word repent literally means to turn around—to see the world in a new way. Prepare the way of the Lord! One friend has said: "You cannot prepare the way of the Lord with hatred, bigotry, racism, sexism, fear and threat. You prepare the way of the Lord with repentance, by turning away from the ways of the world and turning toward the ways of God."² John calls us to reorient ourselves around God's vision of the future, that we might start living right now as if God's future were our current reality.

Joanna Adams writes: "The first thing we must do, is turn toward the vision God gives us of a world made right and say, 'Aha! I see it. This is what God intends, these great reversals to the way we have always assumed things have to be. To those who say, 'what always has been, and is now, will always be,' the prophet answers, you have not factored in 'the dreams dreamed by God and by the agents of God, ordinary people like you and me in whose minds and hearts God has planted God's own dream.'"³

Even today, in a time of great division, God's dream is alive; the stump is not dead. How might we turn from the ways of sin and turn to Jesus Christ? How might we start living God's dream today? We all know that the House of Representatives is considering whether to impeach the president. Some people believe that he has done nothing wrong; others believe he should be removed from office; still others don't know what they think, or don't have the time or energy to be bothered as they try to make ends meet. From the pulpit I have no opinion as to whether our president should be impeached, but I do know that God's desire is that there be no more hurting or destroying in God's good earth. In the midst of all our division, how might we be instruments of peace?

One friend shared a devotional with me this week that says, "We as believers in Jesus need each other. Ephesians 4:16 states, *"From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work."* I love that closing phrase, *"... as each part does its work."* We are not meant to be lone rangers; we're not designed to be islands unto ourselves. We are meant for community."⁴

How might we dream God's dream into a greater reality in our world today? How might we open ourselves to graze with those who are different, to live with those who have seemed to be enemies, or just on the other side of the political spectrum? The church of Jesus Christ is particularly

¹ Eugene C. Bay, *Imagine That in A Sower Went Out*.

² Jon M. Walton, *In Those Days*, First Presbyterian Church in the City of New York, December 4, 2016. © 2016.

³ Joanna Adams, "It Takes Imagination," Trinity Presbyterian Church, December 10, 2000, in *A Sower Went Out*, by Eugene C. Bay.

⁴ Karen Ehman, *How Holding Hands Opens Doors*, Proverbs 31 Ministries, proverbs31.org. May 17, 2019.

gifted to show the world that people who disagree about issues can also agree to work together, celebrating our unity in Christ, demonstrating the reality that we all are made in the image of God, and that those who seem different from us, are also precious, honored and loved by our God, and we may have something to learn from them.

The Spirit of the Lord rests upon us and calls us to the work of justice. As we prepare this Advent season, we can dream God's dream for the future, where that little child of Bethlehem shall lead us all, and there will be no more hurting or destroying. Dream the future and maybe one day it won't only be just a dream.

Let us pray: "By your spirit, O God, give us grace to imagine what no eye has seen, nor ear heard, nor the human heart conceived, but what you have prepared for those who love you. And having imagined, grant us strength, courage and perseverance to serve as your agents in helping to make it so, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen."⁵

⁵ Eugene C. Bay, *Imagine That in A Sower Went Out*.