

“The World Turned Upside Down”

Isaiah 11:1-9

3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Mark and I were talking this past week about how a year ago at about this time we had that snow and ice storm...it came right at 7am on the 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent last year, and I didn't want to cancel worship, but finally our staff decided we really had to cancel worship.

I remember my car slipping on the ice a couple times on my drive home—that was exciting—but then I arrived back home, and I was hoping that the excitement for the day was done.

Apparently, it was not done.

A neighbor called us about 9:30am that morning.

Hey, do y'all know that one of your trees is tipped over on your house?

No, we didn't know that.

Turns out the snow weighed too much for one of our evergreens, and it just collapsed onto our house.

No damage, no one was hurt.

We had it removed, and after they removed the tree, what was left?

A stump.

And that stump sat there for quite a while.

At the time, we obviously needed the tree removed quickly, so we asked the tree people to come out as quickly as possible, remove the tree, no need to grind the stump at that moment.

But then we kept forgetting to call back.

And that stump, it just sat there in our yard for months.

So unsightly...

What good is a stump?

The only word I can think of to say in favor of a stump comes from Shel Silverstein...do you remember his book, *The Giving Tree*?

It's about a little boy who plays in his favorite tree every day  
 swinging from her limbs, eating her apples...  
 and as young man he takes all the apples and sells them,  
 and as a middle-aged man he takes all her limbs and builds a  
 house,  
 and as a retired man he cuts down the trunk to build a boat,  
 and as an old man he returns to the tree.

“I wish that I could give you something,” said the tree.  
 “But I have nothing left. I am just an old stump.”

“I don't need very much now,” said the boy, turned old man—  
 “just a quiet place to sit and rest.”

“Well,” said the tree, straightening herself up as much as she could, “an old  
 stump is good for sitting and resting. Come, Boy, sit down. Sit down and rest.”

And the old man did.  
 And the tree was happy.<sup>1</sup>

It's a wonderful story, but it's also a sad story.  
 In just a few short pages, Shel Silverstein makes the reader  
 wish for an earlier time in the story.

You see the old man.  
 You see the stump.  
 And you don't want the stump!

You remember just a few pages earlier, when the tree was healthy and  
 strong, and the old man was a young boy and full of vim and vigor...

And there is this tremendous feeling of LOSS.  
 (Maybe you think I'm reading too much into this little children's story, but I  
 don't think this book is just for kids.)

**A stump stands for what USED TO BE.**

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<sup>1</sup> Shel Silverstein, *The Giving Tree*, HarperCollins, 1964.

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Now why do I share all this with you?  
Because I want you to look again at our text from Isaiah.

The prophet says:

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

Notice what the prophet does NOT say.

The prophet does not say:

“A shoot shall come out of one of the many branches on the glorious tree of  
Jesse’s lineage—this full and beautiful tree,  
that has such gorgeous shade,  
such wonderful strength,  
shall produce a branch more glorious than all...”

No, no.

Isaiah says “A shoot shall come out from **the stump**...”

From a stump??!!

How many times does a stump GROW INTO A TREE AGAIN...after it’s  
become a stump??

There’s good reason for the prophet to write it this way.

The phrase “the stump of Jesse” –who is Jesse?

The father of David, greatest King that Israel ever had.

But by the time of the prophet Isaiah, the Davidic Kingdom that was once so  
glorious and powerful and strong...it was about to become a stump.

The Assyrians will overrun it,

then the Babylonians will conquer it,

there are multiple deportations into exile for Israel and Judah—

loss of land, loss of home, loss of identity...

And into this time of LOSS, Isaiah says:

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse...”

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Think about Isaiah's decision to use the image of a stump.  
**Remember, a stump stands for what used to be.**

Have you ever spent time, during the season of Advent, thinking about what used to be?

It snuck up on me the other day, and I remembered a time when I was maybe 11 or 12 years old. I ran/walked 10 miles with my father in the CROP Walk for Hunger with our church. Got back, and a group of boys in the church were playing touch football in the yard. So I went outside and played touch football with them, after doing 10 miles!

I got in the car to go home, my dad said, "Aren't you tired?"  
 I said, "Naw, I'm not tired."  
 And I was fine.  
 Woke up the next day, went to school, I was fine.

Why did this memory sneak up on me?  
 Because a couple weeks ago, we had friends in town for Thanksgiving.  
 And we all played kickball together on Thanksgiving Day.

And half-way through the game, I tried to catch the ball, and instead of catching the ball, I almost did the splits.

And the next morning my legs were sore.  
 And my back wasn't right. And I'm hobbling around...  
 And I thought, whatever happened to the good old days???

You know what I was doing?  
 I was thinking about what used to be.  
***Have you thought about what used to be, particularly at this time of year?***

Your two children who are now out of college are coming home for Christmas soon. And it will be good to have them home, really good. But a small part of you longs for the day when they were 7 and 5 instead of 27 and 25. Back when they would be getting YOU up on Christmas morning.

And you would complain, but secretly you kind of treasured it.

And back then, Christmas was always celebrated at your parents' house.

But now twenty years later, your parents are gone.

And your children are grown.

And you still like Christmas.

But there's a LONGING to it...and you sometimes think about what used to be.

You know what the word for this is, right?

It's nostalgia.

Nostalgia can creep up on us during this season.

In fact, it may be one of our greatest TEMPTATIONS at this time of year.

Perhaps the best explanation for nostalgia that I've heard comes from the former tv show, *Mad Men*.

In its first season, the show begins in the late 1950s.

The central character is Don Draper, an advertising executive,  
a brilliant but troubled man.

The first season makes it clear that Don's family life is a mess.

After repeated infidelities, his marriage is on the verge of collapsing.

So Don tries to focus on his work.

One of Don's clients is the Kodak Company.

They've come up with a new slide projector where the slides are not in a straight tray, but in a wheel.

It's **not** a HUGE innovation, it's a small innovation, so they look to Don to create an advertising campaign that will make people want a new slide projector with a wheel.

The clients enter the conference room.

"So have you figured how to work the wheel into it?"

Don starts his presentation:

“My first job I was...at a fur company with this old...Greek [guy] named Teddy. Teddy told me that the most important idea in advertising is ‘new’. It creates an itch....But he also talked about a deeper bond with the product. Nostalgia—it’s delicate, but potent.”

Then Don turns on the slide projector, and as he continues his presentation, he clicks through slides of his own family in happier times.

- In one slide his two children are playing in the back yard.
- In another his son has fallen asleep on his chest.
- In another Don is putting his ear up to his pregnant wife’s belly.

All the while, he continues with his presentation.

“Teddy told me that in Greek, ‘nostalgia’ literally means ‘the pain from an old wound.’ It’s a twinge in your heart far more powerful than memory alone.”

Then Don moves to the product.

“It’s not called the wheel, it’s called the carousel. It goes backwards, and forwards...It lets us travel the way a child travels—around and around and back home again.

“It takes us to a place where we ache to go again.”<sup>2</sup>

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That’s nostalgia...

And nostalgia sells!

We hear it in the music that gets played at this time of year, right?

“I’m dreaming of a white Christmas...just like the ones I used to know.”

Nostalgia.

Maybe it’s the message of our culture and our commercials.

But it’s not the message of our text!

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<sup>2</sup> This summary comes from a sermon by Martin B. Copenhaver, “It’s about Time,” as it appears in *Journal for Preachers*, Advent, 2013.

This marvelous, beautiful text from Isaiah leads us to BELIEVE that we're being taken into a place called nostalgia, with the "stump of Jesse"...but then—  
POW!

Starting in verse 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.*

There's NOTHING nostalgic about that!

Do you have any memory of a time when lions were VEGANS and little children led leopards by the tail?

Isaiah's not preaching nostalgia.

Isaiah says, "See this stump? This stump doesn't stand for what used to be.  
God is going to do something NEW!"

Isaiah's not preaching a world we have already known.

Isaiah's preaching a world turned upside down, that we have never seen.

In contrast to the songs and stories that invite us to YEARN for a past we can never recover, this text from Isaiah invites us into a future that is new and different—and belongs ENTIRELY to the imagination of God!

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And we struggle with that, don't we?

With the imagination of God?

We all struggle with NEWNESS and change and what's DIFFERENT...

Look, the proof is in the pudding.

When you go to church on Christmas Eve, 9 days from now...would you like to sing four new songs that you've never sung before?

No, of course not.

We want "Silent Night." We want "Joy to the World."

We want what we know, what's traditional.

We want God to speak like God has always spoken.

And yet, Isaiah reminds us that there is another side to our faith.  
When life gives us a stump, God is NOT FINISHED.

When WHAT USED TO BE—can never be again—  
and there's a twinge that it will never be that way again,  
that does NOT mean the end of the road for God!!

God is ALSO committed to what is new  
what is unknown,  
what we've never seen before.

The wolf will lie with the lamb.  
And a shoot will grow out of a stump.

The promise of the gospel is that God can and will do things,  
TRANSFORMING our lives in ways we've never experienced before.

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The French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupery is probably best known as the author of that wonderful book, *The Little Prince*.

What isn't as well-known is that Saint-Exupery was also a pilot in the French Air Force during WWII. He was stationed in North Africa, and became friendly with some of the local Bedouin—

tough people,  
resourceful people,  
living their days in the desert.

On one occasion, he managed to fly a few of these Bedouin home with him on a visit to France.

He expected these “desert nomads to be wowed by Western technology:  
the Eiffel Tower,  
the railroad locomotive,  
the automobile...

but those wonders of the modern age  
were met with indifference by the Bedouin.”

There was, however, one sight that filled them with awe.  
It was in the French Alps.  
It was a waterfall.

Remember, these were people who measured their lives by water:  
how much water their canteens could hold,  
how many hours’ ride it was to the next oasis,  
how long their camels could go without taking a drink.

Yet here, gushing from the side of the mountain, was something they had  
truly never seen before.

In the words of Saint-Exupery:

“They stood in silence...

“The flow of a single second would have resuscitated whole caravans that,  
mad with thirst, had pressed on into the eternity of...mirages.

[They stood there,] “gazing at the unfolding of a...mystery. That which  
came roaring out of the belly of the mountain was life itself...

[It was] God...manifesting Himself.”<sup>3</sup>

What was so remarkable, so heart-stopping for those Bedouin,  
was the fact that the flow of water...never stopped.

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May I suggest that Isaiah just told us the same thing today?

I don’t know what stumps you have in your life right now.  
What part of your life feels like a remnant of what you once had...

I do know that God’s love and grace will never stop.

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<sup>3</sup> This story is taken from Carlos Winton’s article, “What Cancer Teaches,” in *Journal for Preachers*, Lent, 2007.

It will never stop pouring down on you,  
and on the person you are worried about this morning...  
and one day, it will OVERFLOW in each of our lives,  
in a way that will leave us speechless, lost in wonder...

Amen.