

“Eating Straw for Advent”

Isaiah 11:1-9

2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent

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Westminster, Greenville

Ben Dorr

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It's said among many of my minister friends and preaching colleagues, that whenever a minister delivers a sermon on a Sunday, she or he is—more often than not—really preaching to themselves. Saying something that THEY know they need to hear, and are hoping that, by God's grace, others in the congregation might need to hear it too.

It's definitely true as we begin this morning's sermon.

What do I mean?

Well, I hope some of you have noticed the new “limited mobility” parking signs and spaces that we now have in our parking lot. I'm very grateful to our Administration Committee, who put those signs up a couple of weeks ago.

And I hope the intent of setting aside those spaces is clear: if your ability to walk across the parking lot is fine, please pay attention to that row and leave those spaces empty for others in our church who—for whatever reason—need to be able to park close to the sanctuary on Sunday morning.

Why do I mention this?

Because last Sunday, I came to church and I spent the morning with all of you in worship, and as I got in my car to leave, I looked up from the driver's seat...and I found myself staring at one of those beautiful new signs!

I had parked in a limited mobility spot!

Why was I in one of those spots?

Old habit, right?  
Muscle memory.  
It was where I was used to parking.

Even when we know we need to stop doing something, it can be hard to bring that something to an END...do you remember at the beginning of the fall, when I asked everyone here to try worshipping in a different pew every week until Thanksgiving?

How many of you gave it a shot?  
Good, good!

In the weeks that followed my invitation, a few of you came through the line after worship and told me you were trying it!

But there were MORE of you who came through the line and told me, Ben—there's no way I'm trying it!

I love my pew!  
Not a hill I'm going to die on, but it proves my point.  
It's hard to bring the familiar, the customary, the habitual...  
to an end.

The subject of our sermon this morning is ENDINGS.  
Not just parking spaces and favorite pews.  
Did you know that we hear about endings every single Advent?

For example, take the scripture passage that I just read from Isaiah.  
Familiar text.

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

Stop right there.

What does a stump stand for?  
 A tree that is no longer a tree.  
 A stump stands for what used to be.  
 A stump says that this tree, which was once growing and glorious  
 and strong...*has come to an end.*

But endings aren't just in our Advent scripture.  
 They're also found in songs.

Do you remember our first hymn this morning?  
 "O come, O come, Emmanuel, and ransom captive Israel..."

What's that verse about?  
 It's about the Exile.

The time after the glorious reign of King David, when Israel was  
 taken captive to a foreign land, and losing their home, losing their  
 temple, afraid they had just lost the covenant God made with Abraham,  
 Isaac, and Jacob!

Had the promise and blessing God just come to an end?

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You see, Advent has something to do with ENDINGS.  
 But I don't say that to bring you down.  
 I say it to give you permission.

Permission to explore whatever ending is going on in your own  
 life, your own heart at this time.

Maybe this will be your first Christmas with no kids in the house.  
 It's the natural course of events.  
 You've raised them. You've launched them.

And yet, you find yourself a bit...nostalgic for the Christmas of 20 years ago, when your 26-year-old was a 6-year-old, waking you up before they were allowed to wake you up on Christmas morning.

And there's a small part of you that, much to your surprise, misses being awakened on Christmas morning before you want to wake up.

Why?

Because that time in life—you can't get back.

It's come to an end.

Or maybe what you miss is much more painful.

Maybe it's your first Christmas after your divorce.

Your first Christmas without hearing the voice of your mother or your father.

If you find yourself in the midst of an ending this Advent, may I suggest that our scripture passages for today...just might be intended for you?

Because they're not only about endings.

They're about the God who sees us through our endings.

They're about the God who promises to do something new.

As Isaiah puts it:

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

It's a remarkable verse.

How many of you, when you drive around Greenville, still see stumps and dead tree roots lying on the side of the road from the Hurricane?

And how many of those stumps have new, fresh, green branches growing out of them?

Right.

Big fat zero.

A shoot shall grow out of a stump?

That's impossible!

But not according to Isaiah.

According to our prophet this morning, God can bring new life out of stumps. A new branch, new growth—that's what God promises, no matter what ending you're going through.

But where that NEWNESS comes from is very important.

This is going to sound like a non-sequitur at first.

So stay with me.

I want to talk a little football.

Back in the 1980s, when I was growing up in Michigan, the Big Ten teams that always went to the Rose Bowl were either Ohio State or the University of Michigan.

I lived in Lansing, which is Michigan State territory, and their football team never went.

Always got beat up by Michigan.

Always got beat up by Ohio State.

But then George Perles became their coach.

And he had a saying he always told his players:

“Work hard. Keep your mouth shut. Good things will happen.”

In other words, you can be whoever you want to be.  
You can be someone new!  
And in 1987, it all came together.

The Michigan State Spartans beat Michigan, and they beat Ohio State, and they went on to win the Rose Bowl.

In other words, you can be whoever you want to be.  
That’s the message that gets drilled into our souls, not just by football coaches, but by society.

Sometimes, that’s proves to be true.  
But many times, it’s not true.

Many times, the endings in our lives disabuse us of that myth, because we would give anything to delay the ending, prevent the ending, and it’s beyond our power to do so...

It’s why the picture that Isaiah paints at Advent is powerful good news. In today’s text, he gives us one of the most astonishing images in all of holy scripture.

Not just of leafy branches growing from stumps!

“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 the lion shall eat straw like the ox.”

Think about it.  
How many of you have ever heard of a vegetarian lion before?  
Of course not.

But according to Isaiah, lions will not always be who we know them to be. In God's kingdom, in God's hands, the lions of the world will eat straw like the ox.

In other words, in God's coming reign, God says to the lion:  
 "This is who you are. This is who I created you to be."

Do you see the difference?

The difference between George Perles:

You can be whomever you want to be!

AND...the prophet Isaiah:

This is who you are.

This is who God created you to be.

We see it in our first text.

The angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is God's "favored one," that she will be mother to "the Son of the Most High."

Did Mary ask God for this?

Did she say, God—I've worked hard.

I've kept my mouth shut.

Let something good happen.

Is that the story of Mary? No...

God came to Mary.

God blessed Mary.

God said to Mary, "This is who you are.

This is who I created you to be."

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James Wood is a professor who wrote recently about his childhood.

“I come from a stock of relationship-quitters. During my childhood, pretty much everyone in my life had divorced at least once, extended family connections were strained, long-term friends were nonexistent, and moves were frequent.

“During most of my childhood, we were poor and isolated. Moving all the time, [it] burned our bridges with the rest of the family...[and] I came to adopt a conception of freedom as unconstrained choice.

“Freedom as the license to leave when things get tough.”

Not knowing how to connect and commit, he grew more and more isolated.

In college, James Wood entered a deep depression. He considered ending his life.

“And that’s when I encountered God,” he writes.

“A campus missionary...visited my fraternity...we met up a few times over coffee. He asked about my life and tried to help me think about God. In one of my darkest hours that year, he invited me to join him on a summer trip with a group of Christian college students.

“That summer...their hospitality...broke down all my defenses. I asked many of them, “Why are you like this?” And...they all answered by talking about Jesus. That summer I devoted my life to figuring out who this Christ was and what it meant to follow him.



“I realized that I am not my own, but belong body and soul to my Savior.

**“I cannot tell you how much the church has meant to me.  
I know that there are people bound to me, and I to them.  
I get to be connected.**

**“What I received was myself. I was given true community.”<sup>1</sup>**

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I think that’s what all of us need, when we are going through some ending in our lives.

True community.  
The knowledge that we belong to others.  
That our deepest identity is not an achievement, but a gift.

Let me get at it like this.

This morning, we lit our second Advent candle.  
Do you remember what it stands for?  
Peace, that’s right.

Let’s review what they all stand for right now.  
Hope. Peace. Joy. Love.

You know what I never knew until recently?  
Where those candles and this wreath come from.

Our tradition likely began in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a German Lutheran pastor named Johann Hinrich Wichern.

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<sup>1</sup> James R. Wood, “Is Commitment Just for Suckers?”, *Plough*, September 30, 2024.

Pastor Wichern started an orphanage, and he wanted to give the children a way to count the days until Christmas. So he took an old cartwheel and attached 19 or 20 small red candles, lighting them on weekdays and Saturdays. And he added four large white candles, to light on the four Sundays of Advent.

Each day during Advent, Pastor Wichern lit a candle on the wreath, and he read the children a story, and he prayed with them, and it was a way of helping the children know that Christmas was coming.

They could count the days!<sup>2</sup>

But think for a moment about who he was lighting those candles for...children who had lost their parents. Children who faced one of the most severe ENDINGS that life can bring.

So what was Pastor Wichern doing, when he made that wreath?

He wasn't just counting the days down to Christmas.  
He was telling those children who they were.  
That they were beloved by God.  
Cherished by God.

He was telling them that they belonged not to a cruel world in which parents sometimes die too soon.

They belonged to God.

That's what the first Advent wreath was for.  
And it's what this Advent wreath is for.

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Foley, *Why We Kiss Under the Mistletoe: Christmas Traditions Explained*, Washington, D.C.: Regnery History, 2022.

To remind you, just in case you've forgotten...

You are NOT your illness.

You are NOT your anxiety.

You are NOT the worst thing you've ever done.

You are NOT the most painful thing that's ever happened to you.

You are NOT your grade point average.

You are NOT your income.

You are NOT your broken family.

You are NOT whatever ending you're confronting right now,  
because God will see you through.

You are who God says you are.

What do the candles stand for?

Say it out loud with me.

Hope. Peace. Joy. Love.

You know what I heard, when you said those four words?

Not just you, preaching to yourself.

I heard the voice of God...

saying THIS IS WHO YOU ARE...

*This is who I created you to be...*

Amen.