“Isaiah’s Vision”

Valley Presbyterian Church – November 10, 2019

Rev. John Wahl

Psalm 111

Isaiah 11:1-10

I know I am not alone in saying that Isaiah is my favorite prophet: not only for passages like this which hint at the long-awaited Jewish Messiah that we typically look to during Advent, when we prepare for and await the birth of Jesus, but also for these vivid descriptions of hope for a peaceful world that he offers. Sometimes, these visions can seem so far away from where we are today: constantly barraged by news of armed conflict, devastation, and disease; so much of it caused or exacerbated by us.

Isaiah fits the description of what theologian Reinhold Neibuhr has coined a “pessimistic optimist,” meaning that while we may be cynical about human nature and our propensity to sin, we can remain fundamentally optimistic because of the grace of God working in and around and through us. Isaiah aptly fits this description because he could at the same time chastise the political leaders of his day for their policies and decisions, while still offering remarkable words of peace and hope.¹

Isaiah likely spoke these words during the reign of one of the worst kings in Israel’s history – King Ahaz – who openly abandoned the worship of the Lord for false, foreign gods; and blatantly turned his back on those who were vulnerable and in need. Maybe it should be no surprise, then, that Isaiah longingly looks back not only to Kings David and Solomon, who represented the golden age of Israel, but back even further to Jesse – to David’s father.

_A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse._ Isaiah shares his vision that from the same roots which produced King David, another shoot is to grow. Like David, who was the youngest of many brothers and a humble shepherd, this new shoot is unlikely and unexpected. By all appearances, the stump looks dead: no trunk, no branches, no leaves, no fruit or flower; just a stump, seemingly dead and decaying.

But after years turned into decades, and decades into centuries, it would seem that when the tree of Jesse was cut down, the line of leaders faithful to the Lord dried up. For the people of Israel, the days of justice and peace – like Israel’s golden years during which the poor were fed and the vulnerable protected – seemed like a distant memory.

This text imagines a new beginning for the monarchy. In this hopeful future, the Spirit of God will fall upon a new ruler, resulting in justice for the poor and the

---

¹ Todd Weir, “The Tree of Jesse”
lowly, and a fundamental reordering of creation’s priorities. Life will emerge from death.

In this remarkable vision of the reordered creation, predators will dwell in harmony with their prey, and young children can safely play with even venomous snakes. Violence between the species has effectively come to an end and harmony takes its place.

_A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse._ When Isaiah’s audience heard these words, they would have immediately thought of David, the son of Jesse, who became king only after being anointed by Samuel and killing Goliath, the Philistine giant, with his slingshot. In his attempt to convince King Saul to let him go fight Goliath, David says:

“Your servant used to keep sheep for his father; and whenever a lion or a bear came, and took a lamb from the flock, I went after it and struck it down, rescuing the lamb from its mouth; and if it turned against me, I would catch it by the jaw, strike it down, and kill it. Your servant has killed both lions and bears; and this uncircumcised Philistine shall be like one of them, since he has defied the armies of the living God. The Lord, who saved me from the paw of the lion and from the paw of the bear, will save me from the hand of the Philistine.” (I Samuel 17:34-37)

In the ancient world, the killing of lions demonstrated divine favor and one’s worthiness to rule. The foreshadowing at work here is clear: David – even before he became ruler – was not only performing the duties of a shepherd; he was acting like a king.²

But unlike his contemporaries, the ruler that is envisioned by Isaiah does not hunt lions. Instead, he mysteriously re-programs them in a way that eliminates predatory violence from the food chain. For, a Jewish Messiah could not leave the world simply as it is, with an evil king on the throne and the poor suffering from injustice. At the coming of the long-awaited Messiah, no longer would children be vulnerable; peace would come.

As Christians, we hear these words and recognize it as a prophecy of Jesus; that the Spirit of God would descend upon him as he brings good news of peace and justice to earth. And as pessimistic optimists, we long for the day when the messianic completion of creation will come; when – instead of what we see around us today, as humans continue to do evil to one another and suffer from the effects of our sin – Isaiah’s vision of peace will become reality: the wolf shall live with the lamb, the cow and the bear shall graze together, and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

---

² Michael Chan from WorkingPreacher.com
A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. Isaiah’s vision not only points to the coming of Christ, but urges us, as Christians, to long for and place our hope in creation’s promised destiny: where peace, justice and grace have the final word. So, don’t give up on that dead-looking stump; even if sometimes, we are not ready to move, but only to maintain hope and wait for the day when the shoot appears.

This morning, we are given the opportunity to proclaim this hope as we make pledges of financial support for this congregation’s mission and ministry. We do so not based on any naïve belief that God’s intentions for creation have come to completion, but instead because we maintain our hope that God is at work in us and around us and even through us.

Many of you know the story – but it is worth re-telling – about how this congregation was founded and began to worship in what had previously been an illicit casino. The roulette wheels and blackjack tables were removed, with a pulpit and chairs put in their place. And so, for the first thirteen years of Valley Church, before this sanctuary was built, worship was held on the second floor of the barn.

Sixty years after the transformation of that old building, we thought it might have again run out of life. But, two years ago, it was again given a new identity as Pass-It-On: a resale store to reach out into the community and to further resource our ministry and mission. Because of the work of its many volunteers, and a vision that what appeared to be dead could have new life, Pass-It-On has become an important link to our neighbors in this community. It has allowed our young people to attend multiple conferences at Montreat and, this past summer, spend a week in mission at the Pittsburgh Project. It has allowed us to increase our support for North Church, and the Dougbe River School, and Chagrin Falls Park Community Center, among others. And, it made it possible to for us to hire Amanda to work with children, youth and families, helping to put together events such as last Sunday’s Rise Against Hunger meal-packaging.

Sometimes, when we look around us, those places and situations that seem like stumps are not really dead and decaying after all. Instead, within, there is the possibility for and maybe even early signs of new life – a shoot springing forth. As Christians, we believe that God is at work redeeming creation, moving towards the time when peace and justice will come; when the lion will give up its ravenous ways, when children are cared for and safe.

Through the commitments that we make to the church – our prayers, volunteering our time, sharing our gifts, offering our resources – we are making the claim that new life can come even from those stumps that appear to be dead. Though some of us are pessimistic optimists, we still maintain hope that God is at work in us and around us and through us. Through the witness that we give – our worship, our acts of compassion, our works of mercy; our offers of hospitality – we maintain hope
that the world can be changed; that new life can come not only to stumps or buildings, but to people as well. Through the grace of God, even what is sinful or broken can be transformed to be just and true.

Operating a church is not free; it requires monetary resources; and for this congregation – despite the success of the Pass-It-On store and the additional opportunities for giving and serving that it has offered us – the majority of financial support comes through the offerings of church members and friends. This time each year, your church leaders ask that financial pledges for the coming year be made, so that they can be used to estimate the resources that will be available for a budget to be created. Based in large part on pledges that are received and can be projected, they begin making the appropriate funding and operational decisions.

As a congregation, we have been incredibly blessed by the generosity and faithfulness of givers; each year, we receive – from you – offerings that are nearly all or sometimes even beyond what has been pledged. Barring unforeseen circumstances, you do not pledge what you do not expect to then give. For that, your leaders – who try to budget for and meet expenses, including our intended mission giving – are very thankful. As testimony to your faithfulness in giving, the decision was made – after some debate – to go ahead with a concurrent $25,000 capital campaign, which is on top of pledged giving; in hopes that this will not negatively affect regular offerings or pledges for the upcoming year.

I believe this faithfulness is a testimony of our hope: the kind of hope that can look at something like an old barn and continue to see new possibilities. I believe it is this same hope that leads us – year by year and day by day – to discern how we will give of ourselves and our resources to proclaim the belief that God is at work in and around and through us. For we believe that the day is coming when out of the stump of Jesse – through Jesus, the messiah that we claim and worship – peace and justice is coming. What might look to be dead or decaying is not always so; not where and when God is at work. For the day is coming, we are told, when our children no longer need to fear for their safety, when the hungry in our midst will be fed, and when those who see themselves as enemies will live together in peace.

There are stumps among us; sometimes we simply use them to sit down on and rest for a time; but all while, God is pointing us to keep looking to them for the new shoot that is springing forth, and to maintain hope that in and around and through us, God is at work for justice. Amen.