

2022 12 04 – From the Root of Jesse

Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10 (The Inclusive Bible)

This past spring I helped to cut down a friend's cotoneaster hedge. Over the past few years the hedge had become more and more diseased. Each summer we would cut out the dead and dying branches until the hedge got so thin you could see through it in several places. So this year we took the drastic step of chopping off all the branches and leaving about eight inches of stump. It was sad to see all those branches being chopped down and carried away leaving behind just a few short sticks in the ground.

We knew that this summer would be different for her garden. The shade-loving annuals that were normally planted beside the hedge would die in the direct sunlight that was now coming through the wire fence. So instead of impatiens we planted geraniums and other sun-loving flowers. And then we waited and we watered and we watched. And by the middle of the summer new green branches had sprouted and were already reaching half way up the fence and, in some places, even higher. Those spindly branches didn't provide the shade and privacy of previous years, but this new growth did give us hope that that there would be a hedge again. And in August those sun-loving geraniums bloomed beautiful red flowers

Today's scripture reading also refers to a stump. It begins with the words:

Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse;

from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom:

The author of this passage, the prophet Isaiah, lived nearly 3 thousand years ago in a time when the people of Judah were under attack. The Israelite empire that King David had built was now broken in two and one side was literally fighting the other. The beautiful tree that was the kingdom of David had been chopped down by over 200 years of violence and corruption and it was now just a stump of its former self.

But even in the face of destruction and despair, the prophet believed that new life was possible—“A shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse”—and he believed that the new life would come from the same place that had given rise to King David’s empire. You see Jesse was David’s father, so Isaiah was saying that a new leader for the Israelite people would come from the same root that had formed King David, the root of Jesse.”

The prophet described a utopian land with a leader that was both fair and just, a land where peace would reign supreme and there would be “no harm, no destruction.” Isaiah used amazing images of a wolf lying with the lamb, of lions eating hay like the ox, of babies playing near poisonous snakes. Even now this image seems unreal and unattainable, but this was Isaiah’s vision for his people, his city, his country, his world.

As you know, we also live in a time of war and destruction, of climate change and civil unrest. We live in a time when great institutions are toppling over, when some days it feels like our world is going backwards instead of forwards. Even our church is struggling to survive and wondering what our future may look like.

Our branches are dying and being cut away and soon there may only be a stump in its place.

And we don't even have to think on an institutional or ecological or political level. We could just consider our own individual lives. We all know what it feels like to lose a part of our family: a parent, a sibling, a spouse or heaven forbid, a child. Many of us have experienced the loss of a job, or a move to a new city or financial hardship. Some of you are now in a time of your life when you are downsizing, letting go of all those things that you have gathered over years of living. We all know the reality of change, of grief, of letting go.

As a minister I get to be a part of the rituals that honour many transitional events in our lives. Sometimes I even have the privilege of officiating at a wedding, a baptism and a funeral all in the same weekend. Someone recently referred to that triad of events as the "perfect trifecta." It certainly is a wonderful reminder of the cycle of life and the joys and sorrows that are a part of it.

Just this week I was talking to my counsellor and spiritual advisor about the paradoxical time in which we live. This is a time of great upheaval in our church and in our world, a time that Phyllis Tickle compared to a "giant rummage sale" (*The Great Emergence*, pg. 16). But even as we experience the death of what we know, we are called to hold on to a vision of what could be. We are called to balance between these two contradictory images of our lives, our institutions and of our world.

And it's hard. As we look at the stump and remember what the tree used to look like it's possible to get lost in the past and sink into a morass of grief and despair. As we consider a vision of a new life, a new church, a new political or ecological landscape it's possible to get lost in the future and forget that change takes time. Somehow we need to hold both our memories of the past and our vision for the future while staying rooted in the present.

Isaiah said that "from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom." I believe that the phrase "Jesse's roots" meant much more than just a paternal lineage. I believe Isaiah was talking about an even deeper, more life-giving root. He described it this way:

The Spirit of YHWH will rest on you—
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,
a spirit of counsel and strength,
a spirit of knowledge and reverence for YHWH.

Isaiah was talking about The Ground of our Being, the Holy Mystery, the Essence of Love. You see Isaiah knew that King David's strength had come not just from his biological father, but also from the gift of his relationship with God. That David, flawed as he was, was a great leader because of the love, the wisdom, the counsel, the knowledge and the strength that he received from YHWH.

The root of Jesse is the same root that you and I can draw from every day of our lives. It is the source of love and compassion that is unconditional and everlasting. It is the source of life that will never die. It is the source of grace and

healing that is ours for the asking. It is the same root from which Jesus was born and lived 2000 years ago.

I believe that a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse because I see that reality every day. I see that reality in you. In this congregation. I see the widow who finds new life with new friends and connections. I see a church growing sprouts into our community creating relationships with others outside our congregation and finding new ways of being. For example the Family Fun Event was a joint effort with the Family Resource Centre here in Swift Current. I see it in the work of our EarthCare Partners, the Loose Change Supper, the Affirming Ministry Group, the Garage Sale and Boutique and in all the community groups that meet here in our building.

These are all living sprouts that will some day form a tree of their own. I don't know what that tree will look like. But I do believe it will bring us closer to Isaiah's vision of a world of peace and justice. And I know that, just like David and Jesus, it rises from the root of Jesse.