**The Seeds of Despair and the Harvest of Hope**

**Text: Isaiah 11:1**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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You may have read Bob Bridge’s column in the Times-Mail about his recent visit to his sister in his home town of Evansville. He hadn’t been home since his mother died just before Thanksgiving a year ago. So it was with some fear and trepidation that he accepted his sister’s invitation to come for Thanksgiving this year. He was doing okay until he drove past the house where he’d grown-up. And then he saw it: sections of tree trunk scattered all over the front lawn. The gigantic tree of his childhood home had been cut down. For the next 30 minutes, Bob was swallowed-up in the dark abyss of grief.

Trees can take on significant symbolic meaning. They played a prominent role in the spirituality of our European ancestors before the coming of Christianity; which is perhaps why we decorate Christmas trees to this day. And I remember the tree that my dad and I planted at a family camp when I was 5 years old. When I saw it 25 years later, I felt like I was looking at my own child.

Yes, trees can take on significant symbolic meaning. So it should not surprise us that the prophet uses a tree – or, more precisely, the *stump* of a tree – as a symbol of the despair of the people of Judah.

But not just their despair. It’s also a symbol of their hope.

“A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse,” we read in Isaiah 11:1. Jesse being the father of King David. And the tree of Jesse being a symbol of the Davidic dynasty – King David and his descendants – that ruled over Jerusalem and all of Judah for more than 400 years. But now the tree has been cut down. In the prophet’s vision, a *bunch* of trees have been cut down; symbolic of God’s judgment for the oppression of the poor and the arrogance of power that have taken root among the rulers of Judah and the countries around her. Hear what the prophet says in the closing verses of chapter 10:

“Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low. He will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall” (Isaiah 10:33-34).

But immediately following those words of judgment come today’s words of hope: “A shoot shall come forth from the *stump* of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The Davidic dynasty will be cut down, along with all of the other arrogant governments and nations; but hope will emerge from the stump.

What we have here may not be one vision, but two, separated by more than a century. The 8th century B.C. prophet Isaiah can see the coming judgment of the Lord upon the nations that have failed to seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God; including God’s chosen people in Judah. That’s the closing vision of chapter 10. But there’s a case to be made for the notion that the vision in chapter 11 comes much later, after the Davidic dynasty has been cut down in the early 6th century. This is the vision of a later prophet who stands very much in the tradition of Isaiah; perhaps the prophet who speaks the words of comfort in Isaiah 40; the words that we used in our Call to Worship. Thus the setting for Isaiah 11 may be the dark days of exile in Babylon: Jerusalem has been destroyed, the descendants of David toppled from the throne, and her leading citizens held captive in a foreign land, where they languish in despair.

“By the waters of Babylon, where we sat down, there we wept, when we remembered Zion” (Ps. 137:1).

We know their lament, both from scripture and song.

But here’s the thing: their tears of despair were watering the soil from which would come a harvest of hope. Already in their midst there was a new prophet who could envision that shoot coming out of the dead stump of Jesse. A new day was dawning. A new Jerusalem was coming into being. A Savior was on the way. Not right away, but someday, it would come to pass. In the meantime, more tears would be shed, watering the seeds of the future.

The Book of Isaiah is a story of loss and vision. Binding together the words of at least three different prophets over more than 200 years, it reveals a God of both justice and mercy. The God of justice cuts off these mighty trees that are failing to bear the fruit of righteousness. The God of mercy looks upon his despairing people, and hears their cries of lament and repentance, and says, “Okay, let’s try again; let’s give this another go.” That would be the God of Israel, the God of Judah, the God of John the Baptist and Jesus, the God of Asia and Europe and America, the God of Indiana, the God of Bedford, the God of First Christian Church.

“A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse…with righteousness he will judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth…the wolf shall lie down with the lamp…and they shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain” (see Isaiah 11:1-9).

 That’s quite the vision. There’re going to be some tough days ahead, but the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together, for the mouth of the Lord has spoken. That was God’s word to the exiles, and that’s God’s word, my brothers and sisters, to you and to me and to this congregation. In this place, in this town, the glory of the Lord shall be revealed.

But first…we have to lean into the pain. We already have to some degree over the last seven and a half very tough years. When things fall off the rails we humans have to lean into the pain before we can see the hope. Whether we’re talking about a church that has lost members and money, or a town that has lost its prosperity, or a nation that has lost its direction, we have to feel the loss – we have to fully *accept* the loss – before the glory of the future will embrace us.

Lyz Lenz writes about the loss experienced by churches and towns all across the Midwest in her book *God Land*. She starts with her own state of Iowa. She visits towns where stores have closed and people have moved away and church buildings once full of life have been abandoned. She sits with people who talk about the glory days and lament the loss that they see all around them and it’s a bleak picture that she paints; a bleak picture that we’ve all seen here in Indiana and Ohio and Michigan; in Illinois and Minnesota and Nebraska and all across the towns and cities and fields and churches in what we call the Heartland.

And it hurts. Driving up the Beaver Valley in Nebraska where my dad grew-up and passing through the near ghost towns that were all thriving communities when he was a boy…it hurts. The church that his great-grandfather helped to build, this church that you all and your forbearers built, the empty pews and the empty store fronts…it hurts. And some of those towns and some of those churches have no future. And that hurts even more.

But in the midst of all that pain, Lyz Lenz says this: “I believe that we need to stare deep into the darkness of loss, and…see the divine.” It’s like the days following the 9/11 attacks. So deep was my despair that all I could do was light candles, sit in the dark, and sing Advent hymns. I couldn’t shove the darkness down and deny it; I had to stare into it, and embrace it and be embraced by it. Or when my first marriage ended, and all I could do was let the waves of grief and guilt and loss and failure wash over me. Or Bob Bridges seeing the tree stump in Evansville. All you can do is look into the darkness and lean into the pain. It’s the only way to move through the night of despair to the dawn of hope.

“We need to stare deep into the darkness of loss, and…see the divine.” That’s what the prophet did, when he stared at that dead tree stump and saw a fresh green shoot emerging from its roots. That’s what Jesus counseled us to do when he said, “Take-up your cross and follow me” (Luke 9:23). An abandoned church, an empty store front, a tree stump: all symbols of loss. But a cross: a torture stake, an execution stick, a gibbet upon which hung the body of the Savior of the world: that’s about as grisly a symbol of loss as you can get. And Jesus said, “Take-up your cross,” by which I think he meant, “Lean into your pain. Embrace the pain.” And the amazing thing is that, when we do, we’ll begin to see the Light that emerges from an empty tomb or a stable door.

Perhaps what’s especially painful is the sense that God has abandoned us. Sometimes it feels that way. That’s what it felt like for the exiles in Babylon. That’s what it feels like for us when the people and the things that are nearest and dearest to us are taken away. We feel the absence of the Holy One.

Let me tell you a story about the absence of the Holy One.

During the 20 years that I served in the United Church of Canada, I baptized infants. That’s what you do in that tradition. The first baptism was in November, and didn’t go so well. I was a Disciple; hadn’t baptized a little kid. I was a bachelor; hadn’t hardly held a little kid. So there I was trying to hold this squirming baby in one arm while baptizing her with the other. Now, I didn’t drop the kid, so nothing bad happened; but it was rather awkward.

Several weeks later, we’re well into Advent, and my parishoners give me a gag Christmas gift: it’s a doll, with arms and legs that move and wiggle. They said I could hold it and baptize it and it would be good practice. So I laughed and they laughed and then someone said, “Hey, we can use this doll for baby Jesus in our pageant next week.”

Fast forward three days. I’m sitting in the living room of the woman that I’m dating in Toronto. She’s talking on the phone with the father of her daughter. He’s looking for the one thing that the little girl wants for Christmas: a baby doll with arms and legs that move and wiggle. Apparently it’s the must-have Christmas gift that year; and he can’t find it anywhere. I’m hearing enough of the conversation to figure out what’s going on and I whisper to her, “I have one.”

She says, “Bob; let me call you back.” She puts down the phone, looks at me and says, “What!?”

So I explain about the doll and we agree to wrap it up and give it to Bob and he has it with him when he and his daughter take the bus to spend Christmas with his parents.

Fast forward four more days. It’s Sunday morning, the pageant is in full swing, and I’m looking at little Mary and little Joseph kneeling reverently at the manger…and the manger is empty. And I’m thinking, “Who’s the idiot who forgot to put Jesus in the manger?!” And then I remember the doll, that was supposed to be Jesus, and I realize, “I’m the idiot who forgot to put Jesus in the manger!” About that time little Mary whispers to me, “Pastor Bruce, where’s Jesus?” Well, Jesus is on a Greyhound bus, heading down the road to Detroit!

Have you ever been on a Greyhound bus at Christmastime; with the screaming kids and the desperate moms and the poor folks looking for work? That’s where Jesus is. If it feels like the Holy One is absent – if it feels like the Holy One has abandoned us – maybe we’re just not looking for him in the right places. Maybe he wasn’t on Mt. Zion anymore amidst the rubble of the Temple and the stump of Jesse’s tree, but he was with the exiles: as they leaned into their pain and listened to the prophet and discerned the way ahead. Maybe he’s not always in our dying churches where folks long for the past and refuse to deal with the present, but he is here in this town. He’s at the Men’s Warming Center, where people are offered food and clothing and a safe place to sleep and five men have found work in the last month alone. He’s at Bertha’s Mission, where hope and hospitality abound. He’s in homes where help has arrived in recent months in the form of winter clothing from our Coat Bank and back-to-school supplies from our abundance. And he’s in churches that are willing to look and see the Spirit of the Lord resting on the outcasts…and resting on those churches that dare to look for Jesus where he has *chosen* to be; not necessarily where they *wish* that Jesus would be but where he’s *chosen* to be. There’s hope for the Church to the extent that we’re willing to lean into our pain and follow Jesus through the pain to wherever the Christ is bringing love and compassion and good news and new life.

We can look at the dead stump, or we can look at the new shoot. And we can journey through the night to the dawn of “that day [when] the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples…and his dwelling shall be glorious” (Isaiah 11:10). Even the root of despair can bear the fruit of hope. Amen.