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December 8, 2019
Matthew 3:1-12
Isaiah 11:1-10
Roots and Shoots

Isaiah Reading: Our first reading this morning comes from the prophet Isaiah, more specifically First Isaiah, who is known as Isaiah of Jerusalem. This individual prophesied in the city and wrote the words we will hear during the Syro-Ephraimitic war in 735-732 BCE, in which Syria and Israel attacked Judah, devastating the land and kingdom. Isaiah uses this image of a tree to talk about the life that will be born from the destruction.

May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be reflections of your word to us this morning, in Christ Jesus we pray, Amen.

Um

Take a walk most anywhere on Gabriola, but more likely on private property than in a park or along a walking trail, you might come upon a stump where a tree once stood. I have a few in my back yard. I notice sometimes stumps remain bare and dead. Sometimes they draw on the nutrients from neighbouring trees and cover the top of the stump with bark . . . sometimes when a live tree is cut down, there is still life in the roots and a few shoots or a little forest of shoots appear at the base of the tree. I used to walk past such a stump near my house in Vancouver and say good morning to the lady bugs that made a home there.

During the season of Advent in the church I grew up in there hung at the front of the sanctuary a series of banners depicting the stump of Jesse. The first week was just a stump, and then a stump with a shoot and by Christmas that shoot was robust and in bloom. I was always quite taken by it, all the while wondering . . . who is Jesse?

Jesse isn't a name we hear too often as we explore scripture. In simple terms, so that we can get to our meeting after church, Jesse is King David's father. The stump of Jesse is an image for the foundation and lineage that produced the Davidic line . . . once that tree was strong and powerful, a thing of beauty, but during the Syro-Ephraimitic war the kingdom of Judah, which was still part of the Davidic line, was cut down . . . but it has always been special and God continued to bless it.

Fast forward 700 years and we meet John the Baptist, whose role it is to prepare for what lay dormant in the stump for centuries . . . God is *never* in a hurry, but God is always on time (Rick Warren).

John has made a home in the wilderness, away from the city and centre of power. He lives on the margins, but with intention . . . he is *intentionally* counter cultural. But as he steps into his role as the one who prepares the way, and the people come from Jerusalem, all of Judea and the region along the Jordan, the wilderness takes on new meaning and a new role, and knows a new kind of power because of what John does in that place. He proclaims, prepare the way of the Lord; come to this place to prepare for who is coming. And the centre of power notices – they are even drawn into the wilderness to see John offer to the people the redemptive activity usually reserved for the temple and sacrificial system controlled by the high priests.¹ In more general terms, John begins what Jesus will continue, challenging the centre of power, and giving power and freedom to the people. The Pharisees and Sadducees come. In the NRSV translation, they come *for* baptism . . . the King James translation says they “come to John's baptism,” and the original Greek implies they could be coming for his baptism . . . or against. The latter would make more sense when you consider his response to the Temple officials . . . (look up) him calling them vipers and all.

We might refer to someone like John today as a liberal evangelical, meaning he challenges the conservatism of the Temple while using old ideas and images from the heart of his tradition to teach the people, such as repentance . . . to change one's mind or to turn around.² He even uses images we've

¹ FOW, year A, vol 1, 47

² FOW 47

already heard this morning, like trees and axes, images of *purification and renewal* . . . water and fire . . . like Jesse's stump, cut down, but offering new life. Jesse's stump holds together the past and in the future, signalling to us that something is happening . . . an ancient echo of John's invitation to prepare . . . "the kingdom of heaven has come near."

Jesus is coming . . . he is the Prince of Peace. The peace he brings is not easy. The Hebrew word for peace is Shalom, meaning complete or whole. Shalom is complex with many pieces that are all in a state of completeness or restoration – what a great image for the human person. We don't become whole all at once, but John offers one of life's opportunities to have a look at the state of our Shalom.

As you prepare your heart for Jesus, what are you rooting into? What are you counting on to keep you upright and functioning . . . other than coffee . . . I know coffee can be a holy space, but I'm inviting us to go a bit deeper than that.

Preparing your life for Jesus, what do you need to let go of? I wonder, are there any twigs or limbs or living branches, even that served you at one time, but no longer serve you. The text says John has this axe at the base of this tree . . . and while he wouldn't give it a second thought to help you cut something down, it takes a lot of courage to let something like that go.

The thing about pruning, though is . . . without that branch, there is more energy to re-distribute to the tree. What in yourself do you want to feed in this season of preparation? Is there a new shoot growing in you? What are you celebrating?

This is our invitation to lean into this season of preparation and make room for the one who is on his way.