

Sermon: Isaiah 11:1-10 (Advent 2A)
Christ Church Riverdale, Bronx NY, 4 December 2010
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Isaiah 11:1-10 (NRSV) A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 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 a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; they shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," Isaiah says, "and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Tree stumps are not attractive and they keep you from planting or building something on the piece of ground where they sit. Maybe what's worse is that they remind us of what used to live there--a tree that has gotten old enough or sick enough that it needed to come down. Or maybe a storm blew it down, or it was struck by lightning, or maybe it just got in the way. We've had lots of high winds around Riverdale this year and you don't have to look very hard to see stumps where trees were less than a year ago. Hackett Park and Vinmont Park just to our north have more than their share of stumps and still some uprooted trees from last summer's tornado. A tree stump is a stark reminder: something that once was is no more. It points to an ending, an emptiness.¹

As we move deeper into this Advent time of waiting, we may become keenly aware of some emptiness in our lives. What has come to an end? What do we grieve for? Is this the first holiday season since the loss of a loved one? Was there somebody usually at the Thanksgiving table who wasn't because of moving away, or divorce, or a dispute? Do finances mean that our Christmas celebrations will have to be scaled back, or scaled back even more than last year and the year before? Are we heading toward a new year with our health diminished from where it was at the beginning of 2010? There may be such broken places in our lives that remind us of a tree stump. There may be reminders of things that once were, or should be, and are no longer. Sometimes all we can see are stumps!

But even if a tree stump is only the remainder of what once was, it can still be tough and tenacious. Tree roots sink deep into the ground and wide like the limbs spread into the sky. Getting rid of a tree stump is hard work, which is why they're so often left in place. Clearing

¹ Portions of this sermon are indebted to Charles Aaron, "New Growth from an Old Stump," *Lectionary Homiletics* (December 2001): 14-15.

stumps out of a field so that it can be plowed is some of the hardest work farmers have had to do, even with a tractor. Even though a stump may be only the remainder of what was once a tall, strong tree, it clings to the ground stubbornly and doesn't give up.

Isaiah prophesies more about a stump than stubbornness and tenaciousness, though. What was once a mighty tree, the rule of kings in the line of David son of Jesse, has been reduced to a stump. Israel has been divided into two kingdoms, with the Northern Kingdom conquered decades ago. Now the southern kingdom, around Jerusalem, is in dire trouble, and will soon fall itself. It's well on its way to becoming just a stump of what was once a strong and beautiful tree. But Isaiah promises that new life will come from that stump, that a shoot will emerge, and from those mighty roots will arise a new king. Things aren't going to be like they used to be in the glory days; they're going to be *better* than they used to be in the "glory days!" This new king will rule wisely, caring for the poor and administering justice. God's peace, God's *shalom*, will be established so thoroughly that even the natural enmities between animals will no longer exist: leopards and goats will start taking naps together, lions and bears will become vegetarians, and people can let their toddlers play with snakes. "For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD," Isaiah says, "as the waters cover the sea." Now the waters *are* the sea; that shows us how thoroughly saturated the creation will be with the knowledge of God.

Christians have seen in this prophecy a description of Jesus Christ. As new growth from an ancient stump, Jesus brings healing, peace, justice and strength to a world that knows too much of sin and failure, of pain and grief. Even though the same tree will never re-grow from the stump, God has brought new life from lots of stumps. There's a stump of sorts at the USS *Arizona* memorial at Pearl Harbor, where you see just the bottom of one of its gun turrets above water. Sixty-nine years ago Tuesday a bomb exploded in the *Arizona's* ammunition magazine and the ship sank suddenly, with more than a thousand of its crew of 1400 killed. Decades later, Richard Fiske and Zenji Abe go to know each other, even though they had been on opposite sides at Pearl Harbor. Abe was a dive bomber pilot, whose bomb struck the battleship *West Virginia* but failed to detonate, while Fiske was bugler on the *Arizona* and saw more than a thousand of his shipmates perish in the attack. At the 50th anniversary observance at the *Arizona* memorial in 1991, Abe met Fiske for the first time when he extended his hand to shake with three American veterans. Later he and Fiske embraced and became good friends; Abe visited the memorial every year after that. He also paid for Fiske to place two roses at the memorial each month and play "Taps" on his bugle, which Fiske did until he died.

It may be as hard to imagine new life coming from a stump as to imagine former enemies embracing and becoming friends, predators buddying up to their former prey, or letting your kids play with snakes. But God does better things than we can ask or imagine; God calls forth life when all we can see is death. If something is missing from our lives this Advent; if there is an emptiness, a lifelessness: a bunch of stumps, let us look for Christ the fresh branch that pushes its way out of the dead stump of sin and grief and pain. Let us focus on and trust that new branch, that growth from God, who finds the lost, fills the empty, and brings new life--radically transformed life--from what has died.