

Sermon: Until it Grows Text: Jeremiah 33:14-16 December 2, 2018 Advent 1
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In our front yard we had an Ash tree. It was tall and beautiful. It stood about 60 ft. above the street. It gave shade in the summer. It was a home to many squirrels and birds in the winter. But the emerald ash borer came to Ottawa. Our great tree was cut down by the city in the fall of the year. Neighbors wandered by and mourned its loss. And in the spring, where the wide stumps sits, new shoots sprung up. The great roots of the tree are still alive and something new is growing.

The Biblical narrative makes good use of the image of a growing stump, of what was cut down springing up with new life. The stump springing forth with new shoots, new life, is a beloved Biblical image of hope.

In the Book of Job, speaking to a time of great loss, it reads: "Even a tree has more hope! If it is cut down, it will sprout again and grow new branches. Though its roots have grown old in the earth and its stump decays, at the scent of water it will bud and sprout again like a new *seedling*."

Isaiah in a time of dark desolation pictures a new Kingdom springing up unexpectedly. The prophet envisions: A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump, from his roots a budding Branch...

And in our first reading for this first Sunday of Advent, this Sunday of hope, Jeremiah uses a *similar image offering hope in a dark time: (Jeremiah 33:14-16)* ¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.

There was in the prophetic imagination a great tree which had been cut down to its stump, the royal house of David. David was the son of Jesse, - that's where the phrase *Jesse's stem* which we sang about in our first hymn comes from. The stump, all that remains of Israel's great tree, was a sad reminder of the glory days of Israel when King David reigned. The stump was a monument to the golden age of Judah, when surrounding nations respected God's chosen people. In those times, which people remembered with fondness, Judeans were prosperous and dominant in the region; people were happy. And it all seemed to be a blessing from God. Think of Israel as a huge tree in those days of King David, the son of Jesse. Chances are, people remembered those days as being better than they really were. But now the great tree was cut down. Only a stump, only the leftovers of a once proud kingdom, remained. There was no king in Israel. A Foreign power ruled over the land of Promise. God's people were scattered, sent into exile. God seemed far away from God's people when the prophet Jeremiah wrote about a branch springing up, something new beginning to grow.

But before the new thing comes there is the image of a stump. The stump that is envisioned means that something good has been lost. The stump of is a reminder of something good that is gone.

Most of us have had our losses in life; the older we get, the more stumps we count. As Christmas draws near many people feel their losses more acutely. Perhaps we remember happier times, happier Christmases.

Maybe there is an empty place at the family table this year. Do we look back and remember a golden age in our lives that is now gone? Do we long for relationships that are now lost?

Collectively do we see a stump or two, is there something in our collective past that we long for, that we mourn?

For people living with a sense of loss Jeremiah shares a vision. He and his people remembered better days, happier years, times of blessing that were gone. He of a new green branch shooting up out of an old, sad remnant of past days. There will be something new. It may just be shoot now. It may take time to grow. But it will be fruitful. It will bring new blessings.

What is this new shoot? What is it that you hope for? ...some possibilities...

That there will be peace in our world for our children and grandchildren

That we will live in and build a just and open and tolerant society

That the poor will be lifted up

That we will grow in compassion

That strangers and outsiders might become friends

That we will learn to live gently on the earth, and find the will to overcome the threats of climate change

That our world will be more just.

Hope. It's not the same as optimism. The prophet Jeremiah was no optimist. He was a very gloomy fellow, so much so that he was thrown into prison because the King and the people could not bear to listen to his dark predictions of the future. Yet even gloomy Jeremiah had hope....that in the end, one way or another, whatever happened, God would be faithful. New life would spring forth

Hope is not the same as optimism. It's not the same as wishing either. We may wish for good things to come our way but wishing for a better tomorrow is a passive activity. We wish and wait for something good to happen. But hope is not passive. Hope is active.

In the early Christian tradition, wise monastics called the Desert Fathers and desert Mothers - wrote about hope and its absence. They considered a Christian without hope to be in the greatest possible spiritual peril. They named this absence of hope: acedia. Acedia is a difficult word to translate into English. It's related to our word for despair or apathy. To live with acedia is to be apathetic, passive, indifferent, and lethargic. To be without hope is to sink into the darkness of inactivity. After all, if there is no hope for the future why do anything today.

And what if all we see for now is a stump? What if we just feel loss and see no sign of something new. There is a story shared by some prayerful people who lived around the year 400CE - the Desert Fathers and Mothers –monastics who lived in the deserts of the Middle East. They wrote of “A young monk who was having trouble waiting for God to show up, difficulty persisting in prayer and in loving ministry when there were no tangible results to show for his efforts. His mentor took a dry wooden stick, planted it and said: water it every day until it bears fruit.”

I shared this story with a friend some years ago and he told me a story in return. A few years before he made a bird house and placed it on an old long stick that he found in the forest. He planted the stick in the ground and waited for the birds to come. But to his surprise the stick sprouted branches and before long his bird house was perched, not on a barren stick but on a new living tree.

God's people wait in Advent for something new. We seek Hope to inspire us to act for the future we long for. Jeremiah sees a shoot sprouting from an old stump. God is bringing something unexpected, awesomely wonderful and new. Hope springs forth. Do we see it? Might we trust that it is true?

Come Lord Jesus come. Amen