

**A STUMP, A VOICE, A STONE; IS. 11:1-10, MATT. 3:1-12; DECEMBER 8, 2019;
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A stump, a voice, a stone, not the typical images of getting ready for the holidays. Rather, UPS trucks scurrying through snow-covered streets into early evening.

Or maybe we think of Advent as the arrival of Christmas cards from friends picturing their families and pets with brief news updates.

Or Advent calls to mind perhaps, a calendar with little boxes on the refrigerator or this wreath with four candles marking the weeks to Christmas and the lighting the Christ candle. But a stump, a voice, a stone? These are the biblical images of this season.

A stump: There's something about a stump that jolts the awareness, shouts death, and is a visible, tangible reminder that what was once a towering beautiful tree, that took years to mature was taken down, cut to pieces, burned up, or planed into boards.

It is the perfect image for Isaiah's prophecy. Isaiah says Israel's family tree, the lineage of David, the father of whom was Jesse, is like a stump.

The covenant promised to Abraham that his descendants would number more than the sands of the sea, that they would be blessed to be a blessing to all the world is now but a stump after the Babylonians conquered Israel, hauled the people into exile, and left Jerusalem and the Temple in ruins.

But, as with all the prophets, after the condemnation and consequences of Israel's sin, hope is proclaimed. Isaiah sees in the stump of Jesse a new beginning.

It reminds me of our four-year old granddaughter Eliza who, when we walk the dog in her hometown in Connecticut, loves to go by the little park with a large tree stump; and she runs ahead and sits on it, dangling her legs over the edge, happy as a butterfly. And I think to myself she has redeemed that poor old stump, just like Isaiah's green shoot that he imagines coming out of the stump of Jesse. Her sitting on that stump, young thing that she is with all of her life ahead of her evokes the branches of that bygone tree in springtime, sprouting leaves, basking in the sun. There she is basking on her favorite perch delighting in simply sitting – not in a chair or couch or bench or even a swing – but on, of all things, the stump of a tree that now holds a happy child at the start of her life.

And the child who redeems the stump of Jesse, is of course, the infant Jesus with all of his life ahead of him; the green shoot of the Jesse tree.

A voice: John the Baptist's voice: We hear him today and we will hear him next Sunday; yet, he isn't any easier to fathom or understand because he makes two appearances on the Advent stage. He is a strange figure. A counter-culture figure as all prophets are.

Matthew puts the words of Isaiah in the mouth of John. John, like Isaiah centuries before, is a voice 'shouting out' in the wilderness, "prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight." I am thinking of the voice of John F. Kennedy when he said, "Ask not what your country can do for you but ask what you can do for your country." JFK, like the Baptist read the hunger of his age for change.

John the Baptist and John Kennedy take on the moral lethargy; they shun sloth and greed and those who look for easy answers to the tough questions of integrity, honesty and sacrifice for a larger cause. They speak to the desire to be a better people, truer to the call of national mission.

Finally, a stone: the Baptist's desert stones: Crowds from Jerusalem and the surrounding districts flock to hear John. Perhaps they are weary of the way their lives are being lived and welcome the call for change. Perhaps they are glad to know that there really is a God who holds them accountable for their conduct. Perhaps they find reassurance from John that the world in which they live is not amoral after all, that morality is not reduced to a single command – "Thou shalt not get caught." It is terrifying to contemplate the alternative, that we and the terrorists and child molesters and purveyors of racism and sexism might be answerable to no one. John, however, declares a God who cares and demands accountability. To be confronted by such a God and to discover who one really is, painful as that may be, brings relief as well.

But it was the scribes and Pharisees who came out to hear him and be baptized by him whom he excoriated. They hedged their bets; played it safe should the world go upside down. They wanted a bit of his message, but not too much—enough to clear the conscience and remove the guilt, enough so that they need no longer be haunted by the past, enough to feel good again. Yet, John sees through their cynicism – "Who warned you to escape the wrath to come? Produce fruit that befits hearts and lives that have changed. Do not presume that God will save you because Abraham is your ancestor; for God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these very stones."

Isaiah told them earlier, "Look to the rock from which you were hewn... Look to Abraham your father." But the problem was the rock became something behind which to hide. It is blind privilege the Baptist condemns and challenges; "bear fruit worthy of repentance; that befits lives that have changed." Just as Isaiah says that a stump will bring new life, John says that God is able to raise up children to Abraham from the ordinary stones that litter the landscape in Israel.

But John doesn't stop there. He goes on to announce that one is coming whose sandals he is not worthy to carry; and he will baptize with fire and the Holy Spirit. He is the one who will turn the ordinary stones of Palestine into children of Abraham; gentiles attracted to his, Jesus' message of accountability and good news.

I am thinking of the stones I brought back from the beach at Monterosso, Italy. They are literally pieces of the Alps, Europe's monolith, cut and carried through the foothills of Cinque Terre by the work of weather, wind and rain, to the Ligurian Sea. To see them glisten in the sun as the tide washed over them made them irresistible: brown, black, white and gray. Some a single color, others streaked and striped, some smooth, others rough. And the shapes endlessly different and marvelous to the touch.

Just as the family tree of Jesse is brought to life by Jesus' ministry, so you and I and all gentiles who enter the church are the new, diverse, multi-ethnic, cultural, racial, glistening children of Abraham.

That's the take away today as we get ready for Christmas.

The coming of God's kingdom, the reign of peace and justice will be preceded by the faithful preparing themselves and their congregations for his coming by bearing fruit that befits changed hearts and lives.

Matthew's pen takes aim at the religious authorities but there is a universality to John's preaching which appeals to anyone with ears to hear – there is an urgency in our time. An urgency to repent.

This past week Bishop Malone finally announced his resignation and a new bishop has been appointed. The crisis in the diocese locally and the Catholic Church nationally looks more and more like a once mighty tree fallen; dead and brittle branches snapping off; trust and confidence drying up; one considers the stump of which Isaiah speaks.

Yet, Protestants in general and Presbyterians in particular can find no refuge in the troubles of our Catholic brothers and sisters. It is almost as if there is a contagion of inward-looking preoccupation in the Protestant world with shrinking members and dollars; and a resistance to taking risks *for the sake of bearing fruit that befits repentance*. The irony is this contagion of fear is spreading just as we are beginning to grasp the full implications of climate change.

As children of Abraham who have been blessed to be a blessing to the world we can no longer assume imposing our cultural norms and expectations on developing nations is the blessing we are to share. Rather the single cause of justice that surpasses all others because it incorporates all others is caring for the creation, which is our biblical charge. Caring for creation to avert climate change is caring for all of life upon the earth. Indeed, Isaiah's vision of the wolf and the lamb, the cow and the bear and a little child leading them is a brilliant depiction of the inherent interdependence and harmony of creation.

My hunch is if John were here today he'd raise that issue with us. He'd ask us why we've taken so long to embrace our calling to care for the earth.

He'd ask why we've let things deteriorate to the point of having our children, Greta Thunberg, for example, and her followers condemn, like Old Testament prophets, our sloth, lethargy and greed that prevents care for this fragile planet and threatens their generation with extinction.

A child shall lead them indeed!

We started today by imagining the signs of Advent – comforting, getting-ready-for-the-holiday signs. Maybe we'd do better to take to heart the biblical signs of Advent: a stump, a voice, a stone.

There is little doubt George Frideric Handel who composed this magnificent music we are hearing this morning and some regard as the greatest work of music ever written, took the biblical call for preparing the way of the Lord seriously. His composition shimmers and shines with his personal faith without which it would have been impossible to compose such music.

For the sake of our souls and our world let us adopt a repentant posture this Advent and begin the work of changing our ways of destroying the planet; let us provide fertile soil in our busy and distracted lives for the shoot from the stump of Jesse to take root; let us heed the voice of John, and let us remember God raised us up from nothing to be children of Abraham. Amen.