

*The "O Prayers," Pt. 2*  
***The Root and the Key***

*The Root: Isaiah 11: 1, 10; Rev. 22: 16; The Key: Isaiah 22:22; Rev. 3: 7-8*

**First Presbyterian Church  
Baton Rouge, Louisiana**

**December 5, AD 2021  
Gerrit Scott Dawson**

---

This morning we're taking up two of the titles for Jesus that we find in the ancient "O Prayers." We want to consider how Jesus is the "Root of Jesse" and "The Key of David." I suspect that most of us don't use these titles very often in our prayers to Jesus. They seem a bit odd. But hopefully we can find our way into the powerful meaning that Jesus is both the Root and the Key for our lives.



Let's start by thinking about the world's largest living object. No, it's not a blue whale or even a sequoia. The world's largest living thing by weight is the Pando aspen tree. Pando lives in Utah, in Fishlake National Forest. It spreads over 100 acres and weighs in the neighborhood of 13 million pounds. How can this be one organism??



Pando began as a single seed which grew to send up one aspen trunk. But because of its remote location, Pando did not reproduce by fertilization from another aspen tree. Rather, it began to send up shoots which became trees from its same root system. Over thousands of years Pando became over 40,000 trees! They're all genetically identical and united by one enormous root system. The trees don't look exactly the same. Location, nibbles from animals, soil and climate conditions contribute to make each trunk distinctive. Yet, their genetic information is the same and they live from one root. One source, one seed, one root underlies a huge forest.

Isaiah envisioned the time when the Redeemer would arrive. He wrote, "In that day the *Root of Jesse* will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious" (Is. 11: 10, NIV). The Root of

Jesse will wave like a banner that draws people from all over. Wait. Don't roots grow in the ground? How can a root fly like a flag on a pole? And who was Jesse?

Jesse was the father of David who became Israel's greatest king. To David, God gave an everlasting promise. From David's line there would always be a king on the throne. And one day, a King, even greater than David would arise to save his people in their darkest hour. The Messiah would be called the Son of David. Right, so there is a connection between David and Jesus. But it still seems weird to mention Jesse. Why does it matter that Isaiah identifies the Messiah as the *Root of Jesse*? Let's think of a few reasons.

**First, because God loves history.** The LORD often identified himself as the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. Our faith is not just in some nice spiritual principles. We're not a religion that only offers spiritual techniques for peaceful living and some ethical guidelines for improving your family. We worship the one true God who intervened in history to save his people. Our Triune God involved himself with a particular people. We call him the God of grace because our LORD intervened to save these people, both spiritually and in history. When we read Scripture, we read the record of what God has done for real people in the real world. Salvation has a *history*. And the more we learn the history of God's mighty acts toward his people, the more we see how God has had a plan for all of us all along.

**Second, Scripture delights in genealogy.** People then and now want to know, "Who's your Daddy? Who are your people?" So Isaiah reminded us of the ancestor of David. His dad was Jesse, the respected elder from Bethlehem who had 8 sons and lots of sheep. But that's really about all we know about Jesse. Except that his grandfather was Boaz. Boaz was the guy who married Ruth, the widow from the land of Moab, a dire enemy of God's people. And that gives us enormous hope. The family tree of David included grafting in a woman who had been raised in a hostile religion. An ethnic outsider. The root system in the Messiah's family tree included Ruth from Moab, and even Rahab a harlot from Canaan. That's why when the Messiah would be revealed, all nations would know they were welcome to join Israel's God. The *Root of Jesse* is the hope for outsiders as well as insiders, for the bluebloods and the imports, for people with a proud past and a checkered one.

**Third, there is a place for all of us.** The *Root of Jesse* means hope even for people who don't know who their Daddy is, or don't know where they came from or what their ancestors were like. They get grafted into the whole history of God's

people. Think of this. When you get joined to Jesus, all the people in this book [the Bible] become your people. When the Spirit creates faith in you and you get baptized into the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, the whole history of God's saving work in the world becomes personally yours. All these events are *my* events. You're still you, but now you are grounded in the great Pando root system that underlies the whole forest of God's people. We're interconnected in the Great Tradition that belongs to every Christian. The psalms, the hymns, the prayers, the waters of baptism and the bread and cup of communion, the sacred places of worship, the depth of the great writing on the person of Jesus, the sacrifices of the martyrs, the mighty works of love in the world, and the very way of seeing the world that has helped people make sense of life for centuries: all this is yours in Christ! Joined to Jesus by faith, you are grafted into the worldwide Root of Jesse. You're connected to all the believers everywhere that have ever been or will be.

In other words, you don't have to be making up the reason for your life all the time. You don't have to create meaning by your own achievements and effort. You join the deepest meaning of human life ever spoken. You don't have to re-invent yourself time and time again. You sink deep into an eternal identity that Christ gives you. Because you are rooted in Jesus, by his Spirit he continues to pour creativity, energy, imagination, purpose and mission through your life.

Now let's turn this another way. Isaiah spoke not only of the Root of Jesse. He also spoke of the *shoot* which will come from the *stump* of Jesse. So we've got roots, shoots and stumps! Can we untangle this? The family tree of Jesus the Messiah includes the great king David and his father Jesse. We noted that the LORD promised David an everlasting kingdom. There would always be a descendent of David on Israel's throne. David's kingdom would endure forever (2 Sam. 7: 12-16). That's a big promise. And in Isaiah's day, it seemed like it would not be kept. Israel had already split in half. Hostile nations were threatening. And in a short time, the Babylonians would burn down the temple and the palace and carry the LORD's people away as slaves again. The family tree of David would get cut down. Nothing but a stump would be left. It would seem that all was lost.

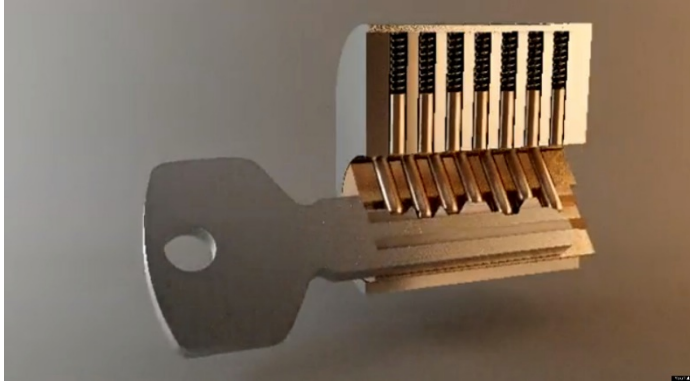


But the prophet had a powerful vision of the Messiah: There shall come forth a *shoot* from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit. And the Spirit of the LORD will be upon him (Is. 11: 1-2). From an old stump a new green shoot would arise and grow. The promise would look broken. The kingship would seem cut down. But one day Messiah would come from the line of David. A shoot from the stump of Jesse. Elder Keith Morris has made a wonderful sculpture of this promise. You can see the crepe myrtle stump, all that was left of a tree cut down. But then you see a new shoot rising up.



But look more closely at the shoot. You see it's not just a plant. That's Jesus growing from the stump of Jesse. He is the shoot of new life. The promise was kept! A son of David arose to establish the everlasting kingdom of God. Jesus is the Messiah who came to give his life for the world. He is God stepping in to take our place and make all things new. Jesus is the King of kings. Israel's king, and the world's King. We await now his return. We pine for the shoot of Jesse's stump to cover the earth with the shelter of his ever branching love.

Lastly, let's look at a related title for Jesus that we find in Scripture. He is the *Key of David*. In the book of Revelation, we hear Jesus himself take this title from Isaiah as his own: "The words of the holy one, the true one, who has the key of David, who opens and no one will shut, who shuts and no one opens" (Rev. 3: 7). Keys were a symbol of authority. The right keys meant you had access to go through the doors to the very seat of power. Doors the king wanted open stayed open. Doors the king wanted closed would stay closed. Keys represent access and authority.



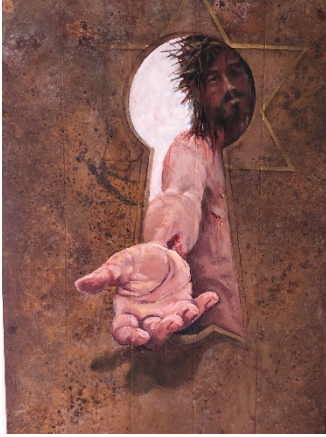
They're also amazing in the way they work. I had so much fun learning how a standard tumbler lock gets opened by a key. Each lock has pins of different lengths held in place by springs. For the lock to turn, all the pins have to be lined up evenly. The only thing that can line up the pins is a key that is

cut to perfectly match the pins. If the peaks and valleys on the key don't line up the pins in the lock, it won't turn. The right key lines up the pins so the whole lock will open with an easy turn. Every time you use a key, in a few seconds a very complex, precise alignment occurs.

Now on a spiritual level, the way keys work speaks deeply to me. We're each unique. The pins of our life line up a certain way. They've been shaped by our genetics, of course, but also by all that has happened to us and all we have done, all the choices made and relationships engaged. Some of our locks are sticky from rust or disuse. A lot of people try different keys on us, but counterfeit keys never quite turn the lock. We need a key that fits us just as we are.



Cutting a key to fit a lock is not a gentle business. The blank key has to be locked into a vice. The whirling blade has to be brought against the key in a whine of metal clashing. The cuts have to be precise for the key to be shaped to fit the particular lock. The blank key will never be the same again. It is shaped forever for the sake of opening the lock.



Once again, we turn to the art Keith Morris has brought to our Advent celebration. We see the old fashioned key hole. Jesus looks at us from the other side of the door. He wants to enter our lives. But we have lost the key that opens the hidden places of our hearts. Or worse, we may have thrown it away. Just tossed it to protect ourselves, so we can never be hurt again. Or buried it for fear of what he might ask from us. We're stuck inside ourselves. Safe, or so we think. Lonely is what we know. Hungry. Empty. Bored. Waiting. Hardly daring to wish a locksmith would come and figure out how to get the door open so day light can come in.

Jesus reaches his hand through that key hole toward us. We see his hand in an open, friendly gesture. We also see that it is rough from wear. His wrist has been pierced. It dawns on us why Jesus can reach his hand through the lock. He has been cut by his suffering to fit exactly the pins in our heart's lock. Jesus himself is the Key.

Jesus the root of Jesse entered the stream of history to be shaped by the wear and tear of life in the real world. The source of all became himself a chapter in the story of God's salvation. And while he was here, Jesus engaged us in all the shattered, possessed, sick, lost, fearful, guilty, proud and faithless ways of our lives. He touched lepers. He calmed storms. He gathered children. Received the touch of sinners. Confronted the self-righteous. Every encounter Jesus himself was being nicked and notched to fit every human heart uniquely. Finally he underwent the fearsome key-cutting of the cross. All the sins of the world cut him. Every one of us shaped his suffering. He accepted the whine of the blades so that he could be fitted to open the lock of every heart. The Son of God who suffered as the Son of Man is the Key that lines up the unique pins of each soul. He turns the lock. He reaches his hand through the key hole in a gesture of love. It is thrilling. Terrifying. He knows! He knows every misshapen pin and rusty spring. Will I run? Or will I welcome him? For the first time ever. Or into a particular room you have been keeping locked. A particular situation he wants to restore. Will you run? Or will you welcome him now?

*O Key of David that opens and none can shut, come and unlock our weary hearts once more! O Root of Jesse uniting and undergirding all of us, send your nourishing life through us again. O Shoot of Jesse, who restored the promise, come again and make all things new, beginning with us!*

