

Prophecies of Christmas, Pt. 2
Life from a Stump
Isaiah 11: 1-10

**First Presbyterian Church
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Recently I was watching an episode of one of my new favorite shows, the family drama, *This is Us*. One of the qualities that makes the show so emotive is the music they select to play underneath the scenes. While watching the drama unfold, I was struck by some lyrics playing in the background. They were so haunting I wrote them down, and then looked up the song. It's called "Ballad of the Dying Man." It's full of irony, about a man who sees his own social commentary on current event as vitally important to the universe. These were the lines, "Eventually the dying man takes his final breath/But first checks his newsfeed to see what he's about to miss."¹

That just slapped me in the face. If I were dying, would I check the news feed on my phone to see what really matters? Would knowing what people are pattering about be what I would need to know in my final minutes? Is the national chatter of vital significance? Later, I pictured a dying man checking his phone and felt a streak of wicked humor come over me. What if the newsfeed I checked in my final minutes was from the Babylon Bee? That's a website of Christian satire. The Bee plays off whatever is currently obsessing us with a bit of biting humor. So what if I saw these headlines in my final newsfeed:

Millennial who pays \$0 in taxes outraged she will still pay \$0 in taxes under new plan.

Sea level rises hundreds of feet due to sweat from celebrities fearing scandals will come to light.

Evangelicals abandon Trump after he tweets that McDonald's is better than Chick-Fil-A.

If I were actually checking my news feed with my last breaths, the grim truth might occur to me: America will not end by terrorist attack, nuclear war with N. Korea or even floods from polar ice melt. It will end from the collective despair of realizing our entire nation is trapped forever in the social equivalent of 8th grade. Constant finger pointing, collective shaming, taunting, tweeting, shouting, malign

mischaracterization, rumoring and posturing will cause us simply to give up. We'll all just die of either being offended or offensive and that will be the end of it.

Is there any hope we might be more than this? I crave a story that runs for longer than the attention span of my flickering screens. I yearn for a narrative that runs deeper than the shallow hysteria of the daily outrage. I want to know the world might be going somewhere, somewhere anticipated, somewhere planned for, and somewhere guaranteed, somewhere much better than this mess.

That's the hope embedded in our Christmas prophecy this week from Isaiah 11. One day, a champion will come forth to lead God's people. The Spirit of the Lord will be poured out upon him in full measure. This Defender will have the wisdom to lead in a way that brings us into alignment with God's will for the world. He will create a society characterized by justice for all and not just the influence of the few. It will be a world of opportunity, where evil is restrained and then banished so that people might flourish in their relationships and their work. His rule will usher in a day where violence ends and the world is set right once again.

This morning we lit the candle of peace. Above all, Isaiah 11 prophecies a



kingdom of peace that will come with the Messiah. Predators and prey will become companions, as the wolf lies down with the lamb. Natural enemies will return to harmony as the child plays over the nest of the viper. All things will be in balance. The American painter Edward Hicks was fascinated with this passage. He painted dozens of variations of his famous The Peaceable Kingdom across the years. This is a vision of the world as it was meant to be under the rule of God's own Son.

Isaiah's vision of the future was a stark contrast to actual conditions of his time. Anxiety filled the air, because the Assyrians were threatening to take over the country. Already in 722BC they had captured the northern kingdom of Israel. The people in their fear did not turn back to the LORD in repentance. They pursued their idols with renewed vigor. They continued to neglect the poor and the broken as they hunkered into self-protection. These were difficult days.

Isaiah began his mighty prophecy of peace with these strange words, “From



the stump of Jesse, a shoot will come forth.” The image is of a mighty tree cut down to a stump. And though it appears lifeless, a long time later, a shoot springs forth from the stump to reveal that the tree is not dead. It’s making a comeback. So, from the stump of Jesse, this shoot will come forth. But what’s the stump of Jesse? I don’t know why prophets like to be enigmatic, but they do. They make us dig for clues so we can excavate a deeper meaning. Jesse was the father of David. David was the great king of Israel. The man after God’s own heart. The warrior who conquered Israel’s enemies. The poet who wrote many of the psalms. He was the heroic leader for whom the people longed centuries later. So why refer to Jesse? Why not just say “David?”

Because I think the LORD wanted to take us back to the origins of David’s call to become king. I think he wanted us to remember where David began. Let me tell you the story. The LORD I Am sent the prophet Samuel to the man named Jesse who lived in Bethlehem. God said that Israel’s next king would be one of the 8 sons of Jesse. But he didn’t say right away which son it would be. So Samuel looks over the sons one by one. The eldest son is strong and fine, clearly a leader. But the LORD tells Samuel “Not this one. For I do not look at the outward appearance, but at the heart” (I Sam. 16:7). Samuel inspects seven fine sons of Jesse, but chooses none of them. He asks Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” Jesse tells him that the youngest son is out keeping the sheep. Shepherding was work for the last and the least. Jesse can’t imagine that his littlest boy could ever be considered. But that shepherd boy was David, and the LORD selected him that day to be king. David, of course, grew to be a mighty warrior. But he never forgot his shepherd roots. David was the king who was also shepherded God’s people.

Fast forward a few decades. King David is in the height of his power. The enemies of Israel have been subdued. The political fighting has ceased. The nation is rising in peace and power. It is then that David conceives a vision. He desires to build a temple for the LORD I AM. A magnificent sanctuary for sacrifice and worship. You would think this is a great idea. But the LORD denies him. He says that David will not build the temple in his lifetime, but one day his son will. But the LORD is so pleased with David’s desire that he makes him a promise. A promise of eternal significance. The LORD God enters an unconditional, unilateral

covenant with David. God promises David an everlasting kingdom. His dynasty will never end. There will always be a descendant of David on Israel's throne. The LORD swears, "Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me" (2 Sam. 7: 16). In making such a promise to David, God made a promise to all his people. Yes, they would have rises and falls, boom times and depressions, days of peace and days of war, but they would endure. Yes, they would experience the LORD's discipline should they turn from him. But ultimately, the kingdom of God's people would have no end. You can see why God's people loved the name of David.

The problem was that this staggering promise got hard to believe. When a rollercoaster of good kings and bad kings knocked the nation around, they might wonder if this promise was true. Or did they need to turn to politics to save them? When bloodthirsty Assyrians have taken over half the nation, as they did in Isaiah's time, they might wonder whether or not God would deliver them, or did they need to make a deal with the enemy. Faith was sorely tested by circumstances.

In fact, it would get way worse before it got better. Isaiah saw beyond his lifetime to the national devastation that would occur. He predicted and it came to pass that a century later the whole nation would be overrun. Jerusalem was burned to the ground. The people were carried away as slaves to Babylon. The monarchy ended. The great family tree of Davidic kings on the throne was cut down. The dream of an eternal kingdom had become a stump. How could the people hang on to the everlasting promise of a kingdom of peace through those years?

But the Word of the LORD kept coming to them. The prophets kept raising up the hope of a new David. Ezekiel wrote, "I will rescue my flock; they shall no longer be a prey. And I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them and be their shepherd. And I, the LORD, will be their God, and my servant David shall be prince among them" (Ez. 34: 22-24). Through Jeremiah, the LORD promised, "I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice in the land." David would return in the person of the Christ, the Redeemer and Messiah.

Last week, we followed the thread of prophecy that promised that one like Moses would rise up to be the champion of the people. And we saw the connections between Moses and Jesus. This week, we follow the thread of prophecy that promised a new David, a greater David who would fulfill the everlasting promise. He would be King over the peaceable kingdom.

So think how loaded with meaning were the words of the angel Gabriel to the Virgin Mary. Gabriel came to announce that Mary would conceive a child by the power of the Holy Spirit. Listen to his words, “You shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Lk. 1: 31-33). The baby in Mary’s womb was the new David. He was the heir to the everlasting promise. Through Jesus, after all these centuries, the eternal kingdom would be ushered in. No accident then when Jesus claimed his roots in David the Shepherd King as he declared, “I am the Good Shepherd. I lay down my life for the sheep” (Jn. 10). This is the one for whom they had been waiting a thousand years. He would be the King of Peace.

It is only with the coming of Jesus that one of the puzzles in Isaiah’s prophecy could be solved. We read, “There shall forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse.” We get that, out of the dead stump, the end of the kingship, a new shoot would arise to keep it all going. But the last verse in our passage says it this way, “In that day the root of Jesse...shall stand as a signal for the peoples” (Is. 11: 10). The Messiah is not only the shoot from Jesse and David, he is also the root of the line of Jesse and David. He is the origin of David as well as his offspring. He’s the root and the shoot, the beginning and the goal. For centuries this must have seemed like such a paradox. How can a descendant also be the patriarch? How can a son be a father at the same time? But when Gabriel announced to Mary that she would bear the long awaited offspring of David, who was the Son of God, it all made sense. Mary would give birth to her Creator. The Son of God was born from the mother he created. He is both the root and the shoot of David, indeed of humanity. This never could have been resolved without the glorious paradox that Jesus is both the Son of Man and the Son of God, fully human and fully divine. He is before us and he came born as one of us. He is the first and the last, the origin and the goal of humanity.

This at last is the story that endures beyond the froth of the moment. It is the golden thread of promise that runs through the ups and downs of human history: “I will be your God and you will be my people. For I have made an everlasting promise that through the line of David will come the peaceable kingdom. The new David, the greater David, has come in Jesus Christ. He has established this kingdom of peace in himself. For he made peace between God and man in his blood shed on the cross. And he will return to set all things right. He will in the

fullness of time bring in the kingdom of everlasting peace, where the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and they shall not harm or destroy on all my holy mountain.”

The image of a dying man checking his newsfeed to see what he’s about to miss is an image of life lived in the shallows. It is an image of pompous pride that what we scurry about doing is all important. It is an image that leads to despair. Is this all we have? The tittle-tattle of the moment?

The truth is, we are all dying men and women. Mortality is our common fate. We are all struck with the realization that this moment may be all we have. To what will we turn for news of what matters? Certainly not to the preening and posturing of the presently powerful. Therein lies madness. We have a deeper story. We have a greater hope. It’s endlessly fascinating. You can trace the promise through the stories of the centuries of Scripture.

God has set his affection upon us. He has made everlasting promises with us. He has entered an eternal covenant of love with us through Jesus Christ. He undertakes to cleanse us of sin, to recreate us with everlasting life, to set the world in harmony again. That’s the story I want to dive into. That’s the story I want to learn and to live. I want to be in on the prophecy of the new David, the eternal Son of God who alone makes sense of the world.

¹ Father John Misty, “Ballad of a Dying Man,” 2017.