

ADVENT LUTHERAN WYCKOFF

Second Sunday of Advent • December 8, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10 • Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19 • Romans 15:4-13 • Matthew 3:1-12

The Christmas season is all about symbols. And because symbols need to be interpreted, they mean different things to different people, the weeks before Christmas often devolve into an endless stream of arguments over what these symbols mean and who they belong to.

Most of these arguments tend to be pretty self-serving and pointless. The annual hand wringing over whether Starbucks not putting a picture of our Risen Lord on its disposable cups heralds the end of Christendom. The obligatory signs in front of town hall declaring that the nativity scene has no religious meaning and is just a holiday display. It could be any first century Jewish family living in Palestine who had a baby boy in a shed surrounded by livestock. Just last week, I pulled up to Wyckoff Avenue behind a car with a bumper sticker that read, “Keep Christ in Christmas.” I didn’t think much of it until I noticed that above the tagline was a picture of Santa Claus visiting baby Jesus in the manger, which gave me quite a lot to think about.

But there is one symbol we should stop and think about a little bit, which is the Christmas tree. Christmas trees really have nothing to do with Christmas. They are nowhere in the Christmas story. The closest thing scripture has to a Christmas tree are the cedars of Lebanon.¹ Christmas trees as we know them today emerged in seventeenth century Germany where the faithful would bring evergreen trees into their homes and decorate them with candles.² Seventeenth century Germany also had an awful lot of house fires. So does the fact that scripture doesn’t talk about Christmas trees mean we shouldn’t have them? Of course not. Only the most cold-hearted Scrooges among us would say so.

But what is interesting about Christmas trees is that when the prophet Isaiah wants to choose an image to represent the hope of God’s redemption he chooses not a towering pine, not even a cedar of Lebanon, but a stump. The absence of a tree. Not exactly seasonal or festive. No one goes to the nursery next door and says, “These Christmas trees are nice, but I’m really looking to decorate my living room with a stump.” So why is Isaiah so set on stumps?

Because Isaiah and his contemporaries knew what it was like to be cut down, cut off, levelled. Many of them believed that the spirit of God had rested on the line of Jesse and his son King David. They thought that this royal dynasty would make Israel a truly great nation. They would tower over the other nations of the earth, other people would look to them for guidance and protection. But what happens? They get sacked by the Assyrians and the Babylonians. The tree gets cut down. The line, the monarchy, the dynasty comes to an end. The tree becomes a stump. Incapable of growth. Dead. Lifeless. Pointless.

The disciples knew something about stumps, too. After all, what is the cross but a stump? The disciples believed that Jesus was going to usher in God’s new age, that the kingdom of Heaven was entering the world through his life and ministry. But what happens? At the moment of Jesus’ greatest promise, he is executed. You thought Jesus was going to change things? Well, now he’s dead. Lifeless. Pointless.

And, of course, we know something about stumps, too. Parts of our lives where we expected something good, and instead we got cut down to size. We don’t call them stumps, of course, but we call them other things. Lay offs and relapses. Diagnoses and deportations. Breakups and

¹ Psalm 92:12

² Sarah Pinault, “The Christmas Tree by the Numbers,” *Wired*, December 23, 2012.

<https://www.wired.com/2012/12/christmas-tree-numbers/>

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foreclosures. And what makes them so painful is that feeling of lost promise. It's that sense of knowing that there was potential here, and now it's gone. Cut down. Cut off. Leveled.

So why is Isaiah so into this stump? This dead, lifeless, pointless thing? Well, it turns out it's really not about the stump. It's about the shoot. It's the spirit of God which rests on this little sprig of green. This thing that we thought was beyond redemption, that we thought was dead, turns out to have some possibility of new life. Where we thought there was only despair, there turns out to be some reason for hope.

Isaiah suggests that God's redemption in the world isn't some overwhelming act where the heavens are torn in two. It isn't some towering pine that people can see from miles around. It's often something so seemingly insignificant that we often don't stop to notice it. We often lament that we don't think God is active in the world. Isaiah tells us that sometimes the real problem is that we aren't looking closely enough.

So Isaiah's gift to us is teaching us how to pay attention. This gift is something of a real challenge. Because paying attention, being present in the moment, focusing on what we are doing right now, is one of the hardest things for us to do. We get distracted by our anxiety about the future. We replay things that happened in the past again and again. We listen not to understand other people but to find holes in their arguments we can exploit. We look forward to things, and when they arrive we get disappointed that they're going to be over soon. Even when we're here, we're really somewhere else.

In our age of distraction, there is perhaps no greater gift we have to give other people than our attention. More important than our money. More important than our time. More important than any item we could scrounge up. Attention.

It's sort of funny that most of the people we would call "holy," the people who make it possible to believe in God, aren't especially happy people. They aren't well-off. They aren't obnoxiously pious or even religious. And they often even well-liked by the people around them. (We often don't fully appreciate them until they're gone.) But they have something in common: they're very good at paying attention. At noticing things. When you talk to them, you get the sense that you are the only person in the world that matters to them right now. That there is nowhere else they would rather be. It's like they're deeply in tune not with the markets or the culture or the politics of the moment but with other people's hunger for recognition and affirmation.

Spike from St. Matthew Trinity Lunchtime Ministry in Hoboken has a certain ethic he operates by. If he's working on a task or something in the kitchen that needs his full attention and a guest comes up to him to ask him a question or talk about their day or just rant about whatever, he leaves whatever he's doing and talks to the person. This way of doing things is maddeningly inefficient. It's just one interruption after the next, and he gets way less done than if he worked in a more effective way. But he says that he doesn't tell people to wait because they're told to wait everywhere else they go. Spike gives people food and clothing and toiletries and other things. But he also gives people something they can't always get somewhere else. He pays attention to them.

When we learn to pay attention, when, like Isaiah, we engage in that prophetic task of sussing out God's presence the world, it has a revolutionary effect on how we engage the world around us. Because instead of spending all our energy pulling on dead stumps to try to bring them back to life, we can search out and protect the new creation that is breaking through underfoot and out of sight.

This isn't to say that things go back to the way they were. As Isaiah's descendants knew, the nation eventually came back from exile, but they never reclaimed their former greatness. The new king turns out to be nothing like King David. Instead, "with righteousness," Isaiah writes, this new leader "shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth." As the early church

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knew, Jesus triumphed over death, but things never went back to the way they were. The days of Jesus' public ministry, preaching and teaching, were over. Easter redeems Good Friday, but it doesn't undo it. And we know something of that, too. That when we try to repeat the past, when we try to make things go back to normal, we find that there is no normal there anymore. Isaiah's vision reminds us that God's presence brings new life, not a return to the old.

This is a strange sort of comfort. It's probably not what Isaiah's listeners wanted to hear. It's probably not what most of us want to hear, either. But Advent is a strange sort of season, and God knows we live strange sorts of lives. We never really get over things. But somehow we get through them. The stump is dead. But somehow the spirit of God brings forth new branches. The cross reveals the presence of death. But somehow God transforms it into the tree of life. Pay attention.

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