

Stump Stories

December 4, 2016

When I retired from teaching a few years ago, one of my tasks was to decide how much of my office junk I would bring home. Unfortunately, much more than I needed, and I am still sorting through it. One item that came home was a Christmas cactus that I have had for years. I don't even know where I got it but I brought it home. Each year about this time it would bloom and was usually covered with these beautiful pink flowers. My wife hates this plant. I don't know why, she just does. And so, for the last couple of years, it has been neglected and moved around to various parts of the house.

Last spring I finally moved it outside hoping it would just die from lack of attention. It didn't. When it turned cold again I brought it inside and stuck it in a dark corner somewhere and tried not to think about it. But even after all this neglect, with leaves looking dark and pitiful, the darn thing sat in its dark corner and bloomed its usual beautiful pink flowers. Roots and plants and stumps have deep power in them which I don't always appreciate or understand. They bloom even when life seems dry and distant. God's love is like that too.

Our readings this morning present us with an image of the stump of Jesse as an image of hopefulness for the future of Israel, and the new king who will lead her back to her former glory, as well as, the hope we have that Christ has come to draw us near to God that we may live in peace and harmony.

It is about both national hope as well as individual hope, that the world in which they live will be restored and that they will be restored to right relationship with God. It is about hope based on faith in the deep roots of God's history with his people and the promise of life to come. And Jesus is the fulfillment of that hope which Paul emphasizes for all of us.

This story this morning about the stump and the root of Jesse gets me wondering about stumps and the life that springs from them. And particularly in this season of Advent; this season of preparation for the coming Christ Child, that we look honestly at our hopes and dreams for the future, as well as those hopes and dreams we may have abandoned or those dreams that have been cut down like the trees of Lebanon or an old Christmas cactus.

Not unlike the people of Judah, we live in difficult times as well. We don't have the Assyrians breathing down our necks, but we know about war and conflict. This week we will remember Pearl Harbor Day, a day we remember because of those tragic and destructive moments leading us into World War II. And we seem to have been in non-stop wars for as long as I can remember, and that doesn't seem to change no matter what the prophets foretell. As Woody Allen said, "The lion will lay down with the lamb, but the lamb won't get much sleep."

We know about economic woes and despair as well. We all have friends who are struggling with debt and money and the holidays don't help with that one bit. We have a growing and desperate gap between the incredibly rich and the rest of us in this country, where inequality seems to be accepted as the norm, and it has fueled our debates and air ways for many months now.

We also know about tragedy and life not turning out like we expected. We have all been watching the terrible news of the devastation of Gatlinburg and all the homes and lives lost due to fires last week. People are stunned beyond belief and don't know where to even begin to recover. And then the rains and tornados tore through the area leaving behind a swath of destruction of homes and property, taking a few more lives as well. And yet, even in the midst of all this, there was a moment that reminds us that there is hope for the future. In Athens

Tennessee, the destruction was unbelievable. But in an interview that morning the Mayor John Gentry, with great emotion said, “In one of our hardest hit areas, a new child came into the world. The family’s home was destroyed but they made it to the hospital in time and so we had 20 injured and one brand new life.” Everyone is doing well.

New life, right in the middle of a tornado. Kind of gives you some perspective, doesn’t it? maybe makes one consider, what is really important, and what gives meaning to our lives. Maybe it’s not all the things we possess, though they are important to us, but life, new life, which seems to happen regardless of the situation. That there is still room for Hope, and the roots of life run far deeper than we imagine, and are far stronger than fear.

In a devotional, this week by Stacey Simpson Duke she suggests that “According to Isaiah, the transformation from a culture of fear to a world at peace begins with a stump. Out of something that appears finished, lifeless, left behind, comes the sign of a new life—a green sprig. This is how hope gets its start—it emerges as a tiny tendril in an unexpected place.

That we should examine where the stumps are in our own lives; where do they feel cut off? Can we imagine or believe that even now God might be nurturing the growth of something new and good from your old, dead dreams? Can you consider what areas of your life most need the promise of new life, and how you might become open to such newness? What is the stump of Jesse in your life—something that appears lifeless and finished? What would it mean for that stump to bring forth light and life?” and what might that mean for all of God’s children if we responded to the Spirit’s call to new life, to creativity, to the visions that have been given for the benefit of all?”

A couple of weeks ago, I saw this story on the news which has since gone viral. I think it speaks powerfully to our text this morning and so I want to share it with you. It was reported on CBS Morning News.

“Not long ago, in a cemetery outside Augusta, Georgia, a loving couple was buried – the wife, buried below a white bouquet and the husband, buried above in a mound of grief.

“Took me totally by surprise,” Dan Peterson said.

The 82-year-old said after Mary died, he fell into a deep depression, and he spent days just staring out at the squirrels.

He had lost any purpose for living and was basically just waiting to die. For six months, it was just that bad.

Then it all changed after a visit to a Publix grocery store. Dan was nearing the end of the canned vegetable aisle. He hates grocery shopping and, by all accounts, the expression on his face confirmed his aggravation. He, like many of us, doesn’t hide his feelings very well.

But that’s when this unapproachable man was approached by a four-year-old girl named Norah Wood.

In the security footage, you can see Norah who was riding in her mother’s grocery cart, randomly reaching out to him. Her mom, Tara, said it was quite embarrassing.

“She stood up and said, ‘Hi old person, it’s my birthday today,’”

“Hi old person,” Dan recalled.

The girl then had the audacity to demand a hug.

Now you might think a miserable old man who was scowling his way through the grocery store might not take this well but Dan said,

“‘A hug?’ ‘Absolutely!’”

Norah got her hug and then asked her mom to take a picture of her with her new friend.

“She zeroed in on him like a missile. And she didn’t want anything from him,” Tara recalled. “She just wanted to make him feel loved and give him a hug. And his little lip quivered and he was teared up and it was just so sweet.”

“And Dan told her, ‘You don’t know. This is the first time, for quite a while, that I’ve been this happy,’”

That all happened a couple months ago, and his grin has only gotten wider since.

Today Norah visits at least once a week. And every time, it’s the grocery store all over again.

“Totally unbelievable,” Dan said.

Dan does have grandkids of his own, but they’re grown and gone. And Norah does have grandparents, but her mom said this is a completely different kind of bond that almost defies explanation.

“She fell asleep holding a picture of them. And I’m like, what!” Tara said, laughing.

To Dan, it’s equally miraculous but far less mysterious. He believes Norah is, quite literally, an angel. “She opened me to a love that I didn’t know existed,” Dan said.

During the interview, Dan was asked, “When your wife died, you felt like you didn’t have any purpose anymore. Do you feel like you have a purpose now?”

“Of course – Norah, watching her grow up,” Dan said. “I know I made room in my heart for a lot more.”

Stump stories. Kind of a funny name for a sermon. But these are our stories today. And Advent and Christmas are a time to consider how much room you have in your heart for hope, love, joy, peace, and possibly, hugs. Like the Grinch it is time to let your heart grow a few sizes and see what happens. To let a shoot arise from the stump or your life and follow where it grows.

Jesus said in John’s gospel “I am the tree and you are the branches.” We too are connected to the stump, the deep roots of God’s promises and love to Israel. We too are expected to grow, to branch out, pushing upward towards the light, and like holy suckers from the stump of Jesse, we should be everywhere, doing and sharing God’s unconditional Love.

So, what is the Holy Spirit reminding you to do? What dreams and visions have you consistently been denying or cutting back to the stump because it isn’t practical or others don’t approve or it just seems crazy? What dreams keep coming back in your life over and over again; some calling, some idea, or some vision for following Christ’s example of love in the world? Not only personally, but the church as well.

Frederick Buechner in a thought about vocation says “The place God calls you to is the place where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet.” Where is that for you in this Advent season? Where is your gladness and how can you connect that to the world’s deep hunger? I wonder?

A shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse and that shoot is the love of Jesus that you have been waiting and watching for. And today as we take holy communion we remember that hope. That promise of presence, that promise of peace and abundant life, both now and for the future. Thanks be to God. Let us pray.

Prayers of the People

God of hope and encouragement, we come in the midst of this season of busyness and preparations: to find a time and space to slow down, to reflect on what our true preparations should be.

We need to prepare our hearts to receive the gifts of love and hope. We need to prepare our minds to focus on your promise that a messiah will come and nothing will be the same. We need to prepare our spirits: to praise God for prophecy, promises, and preparation; to find hope and encouragement; to find peace and joy.

God of Advent Peace, we lift up to you our prayers for the world and those around us. We pray for those who are afraid and isolated. For those who are dealing with tragic losses of their property or the lives of loved ones. For those who feel helpless and overwhelmed because they don't know who will help them.

Grant them peace loving One, grant them calm, grant them assurances of your promises to be with us as we walk this journey called life. Thank you for all those who have shown that love by their kindness and care. For those who walk the front lines of forest fires or battle grounds. For those who give generously to those in need, for those who stand with the oppressed demanding justice and equality. Give us all your courage to be faithful disciples.

We remember this morning those who are close to our hearts and close to our homes and place them in your tender care with prayers both spoken and silent.

Hear our prayers, God of Grace, and help us to live them out, working for peace and justice, mercy and purpose, in all we do this day and all the days to follow. For we ask this in Jesus' name who taught us to pray saying.