

December 4, 2016
Isaiah 11:1-6
Pastor Rosanna McFadden
Creekside COB

“Knowledge and Righteousness”

Good morning! On this second Sunday of Advent, we are given an image -- several images, actually -- from this text from Isaiah chapter 11 which have inspired artists and poets through the centuries. As we consider Faithfulness this morning -- God’s faithfulness to us, and our faithfulness to God -- this is the first biblical image I would like to leave with you.

As you can see, this is a tree stump with a little green plant growing up from it. This is basically what is described in verse 1 of Isaiah 11: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” Anybody that knows anything about Jewish genealogy -- and this would be any Jew who is hearing or reading the prophet Isaiah, because history and family are vital to Jewish identity -- any of these folks would know that the stump of Jesse is not a species of tree, it’s a metaphor for a family tree. This is the tree of the family of Jesse. Jesse, as you may remember or can read about in 1 Samuel chapter 16 was a faithful Jew who lived in Bethlehem, and was blessed with 8 strapping, handsome sons. The prophet Samuel met Eliab, Abinadab, Shammah and four other before they finally sent for the youngest: a shepherd boy with beautiful eyes and a name which I can actually pronounce: David. David was the second and most famous king of Israel. If you are someone, or you know someone named David, your name almost certainly goes back to this proud and historic family tree of Jesse of Bethlehem. Same goes for anyone you know named Abinadab and Shammah.

David’s reign began 1000 years before the birth of Christ. Isaiah is writing about three hundred years later: well after David and his son, Solomon ruled a united Israel, and then the country divided into the

north and south kingdoms of Israel and Judah, and was ruled by a series of kings -- mostly bad ones. The countries which David united and ruled are, by the time of Isaiah, separate and in shambles, economically and spiritually. They are on the verge of destruction by their more powerful political neighbors. What was once a robust and flourishing tree has been reduced to a stump.

We had a tree cut in our yard cut down last month. This was a big, healthy hickory tree, probably 50 or 60 feet tall. I don't know how old this tree was, but it was mature when we moved to our house more than 20 years ago. I'd guess that it was at least 50 years old. We hired a tree guy to take it down. How long do you think it took one man with a chain saw to cut it down? An hour? Two hours? Less than 10 minutes. In about the time it takes me to say "Rrrrrr Rrrrrr" that big tree was on the ground. It was impressive and a bit sad that it went so quickly. Any fool with a chainsaw can cut down a tree. If they're really foolish they might hurt or kill themselves in the process, but the tree will still be dead. What takes years and decades and generations to grow can be destroyed pretty quickly. And once a tree is cut off from its roots, you can't re-plant it: all you can do is use it for lumber, or burn it for firewood.

We know that Isaiah was working this tree theme and comparing it to nations and governments because of what comes immediately before our text today. Listen to Isaiah 10:53 and 54: "Look, the Sovereign, the Lord of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down, and the lofty will be brought low, he will hack down the thickets of the forest with an ax, and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall." And then we get this verse about a shoot coming out from the stump of Jesse, and we know Isaiah is still using a metaphor, because the next verse says, "the spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him." Wait, the shoot coming out of the stump is he? Yes, actually it is a person. This passage from Isaiah isn't about trees -- or even about lions or lambs or leopards -- this passage is about government and power. It's about knowledge and righteousness.

We might like to pretend that there is no overlap between politics and religion: in the United States our founding fathers went to some trouble to try to keep these separated, but this is not the case in many nations in the world, and it was certainly not the case for the Jews of

the Old Testament. The Bible is a record of kings and nations, of human power and corruption, and divine power and perfection. The Messiah that the Jews were longing and praying for is literally “The Anointed One,” the king anointed by God who would come to bring new life and hope to their stump of a nation: severed from its root and bound for the fire.

In chapter 11 beginning in verse 2, Isaiah is describing what this king and his kingdom will be like. I won't read it all again since Jean did it so well, but it's a beautiful word picture: a ruler on whom rests the spirit of the Lord, who is righteous and just, who carries faithfulness around his body the way you'd wrap up in a coat. And his kingdom -- o my! Artists have had a field day portraying this kingdom where animals who usually hunt and kill each other eat grass and hay together and snuggle up afterward to sleep. They do not hurt or destroy and the whole earth is full of the knowledge of the Lord. Such a beautiful image.

It's probably worth noting here that no kingdom like this has ever existed. Animals don't behave like that -- lions eating straw, the leopard lying down with the goat and both of them still being there in the morning -- not gonna happen. Human don't generally behave like this, either. Power corrupts; politicians are all a bunch of crooks. Who is the ruler of this menagerie, anyway? It's either the perfect king or a little child -- Isaiah uses both. Someone who is knowledgeable, righteous, and completely innocent. There has never been an earthly ruler like this. Not King David, not Fidel Castro, and not anyone named Clinton, Bush, Obama, or Trump. So why is Isaiah messing with us by talking about something that will never happen?

Call it the Prophet's Prerogative, or you can borrow a phrase from biblical commentators and call it The Prophetic Imagination. Either way, it reminds us that the role of prophecy is not merely to tell people off and make them repent; one of the roles of a prophet is to hold a vision for the people. That vision includes what the future could look like. Sometimes it is a vision of punishment and destruction; sometimes it is a future full of knowledge and righteousness; and often, how the people choose to act determines what future they're going to get.

As we think about faithfulness this morning, I want to focus on a particular group of people. Although people of any age can be faithful, faithfulness implies a certain longevity and maturity; faithfulness means a commitment to behavior that is repeated again and again over time. If I want to lose weight and I have stuck to my diet for the past three hours, that's not a bad thing, but it doesn't qualify as a faithful life choice, either. Faithfulness can take many forms: relationships, learning, vocation, stewardship. Faithfulness is fifty years of marriage; faithfulness is students who have committed to be apart from their home and families in order to learn more about Christian ministry; faithfulness is a widow who puts something in the offering plate every week -- no matter how much or how little it is -- because that was always part of what her family has done; faithfulness is following a 12-step program and mentoring others in addiction recovery. I could give many more examples: I'm sure you can think of your own. If you do, you will probably think of people who are or have been members of this family of faith. Their actions are not always front and center -- faithfulness isn't usually flashy -- but they are people we count on for their judgement and leadership and commitment. People whom we trust with our finances, people who get up early on Sunday mornings to make food or start coffee, or rehearse music or teach Sunday School. These are people I hope you remember and thank as we consider faithfulness. None of these people are perfect: human faithfulness never is. What we remember and celebrate is the way that faithful people remind us of God, who is always faithful. The only way which humans can remain faithful to the commitments that we have as employees, volunteers, students, parents, children and disciples through the faithfulness of God, who will never leave us, and who always works for our good. Our faithfulness should always point beyond ourselves to the grace and goodness of God, because God is the source of all faithfulness.

I'd like to close by going back to Isaiah 11, and those wonderful characteristics of the ideal king: blessed with God's spirit, knowledge, truth and righteousness. I said earlier that there has never been an earthly ruler like this; but in Advent, along with the prophet Isaiah, we wait for and long for Christ, the Messiah, the Anointed One; the king of kings and lord of lords. If we want to live in a kingdom like that, we need to do more than simply wait. God knows that the earth is not yet full of the knowledge of the Lord. We as leaders and followers of

Christ the King need to live our lives as a reflection of God's faithfulness: we are called to grow from the roots of Jesse and the branches of Jesus Christ. We are called to let the spirit of the Lord rest upon us, so that we can bear the fruit of justice and peace. We won't always get it right. But if we truly long for Christ's kingdom to come, we need to live in the hope that imagining the world which God wants is the first step in making our longing a reality. We can't be faithful to this vision with just our own strength, but we can do all things through Christ, who strengthens us.

May the knowledge and righteousness of God be with us as we live as faithful followers of Christ Jesus. O come, Faithful Sovereign. Amen.