

Sermon (12/4/16, Isaiah 11: 1-10):

When you think about it tree stumps can be a sad thing – especially big tree stumps - the kind that are so large it's difficult to wrap one's arms around. They represent just a small remnant of what once was. Their lifeless, slowly rotting presence can provoke one to wonder what this tree might have looked like when life pumped through its roots. The large size of the stump suggests it probably once soared high into the sky, maybe even dwarfing many of the other trees around it. Most likely it had lots of branches fanning out from its trunk, loaded with leaves that cleansed the air and maybe even acorns or other such fruit that eventually fell to the ground providing food for little creatures. To be sure some of those branches had to be thick, strong and mighty. Maybe a swing once hung from one of them, providing a child, maybe even an adult many hours of delight and serenity. Maybe its branches functioned as steps for someone to climb heavenward to see the world from a whole new vantage point or to hide from the world's meanness or maybe even to pray that their tears might be dried by the Creator. Somehow, hidden high in the branches of a tall tree like that makes God feel a bit more reachable.

I remember learning as a young lad that one can determine a tree's age by counting the rings of a tree stump. In fact, a careful analysis of those rings can also reveal much about that tree's story. They might show the droughts the tree survived as well as the good years when the rain and sun properly mixed, causing the tree to thrive. They might reveal a fire that came close, scorching a part of the tree but leaving enough of it intact so that it could heal.

I was so excited to have these new Dendrology skills! (Dendrology is the study of trees. Impressive right?) I could hardly wait to tell my parents convinced I would be telling them

something new. In fact, my hope was that they would join me in my excited desire to cut down a tree in our backyard so that I could show off my new found acuity in tree ring reading. Thankfully, they talked me down from that one!

Yes, when one considers the glories and majesty of a tree's life, a tree stump can be a sad thing. Something so big, so majestic, so gentle in spirit, so giving, so enduring, so seemingly immovable, reduced to so little.

Now, to be sure, I am not a tree stump hunter eager to find rings to count and analyze. In fact, I tend to not think twice about them. I must confess, though, that this year, this season of Advent, this season meant to drive us deep into our yearnings and longings, has been different. For some reason I've taken greater notice of the metaphoric tree stumps that surround me. There seems to be so many of them.

Perhaps, it's just a personal thing, the mood I'm in, the stage of life I occupy. Maybe it has something to do with the celebration of the 90<sup>th</sup> birthdays of my parents and in-laws and an increased awareness of their physical frailty as well as their sadness over the many losses they've had to endure. Maybe it has something to do with a house I go home to that suddenly feels deafeningly quiet these days. Maybe it's the fear I feel as I look out upon the horizon of the future. The alarming rate of how fast the earth's environment is degrading. The increasing divisive hostility I feel in our country. The intolerance and lack of desire to have constructive dialog without needing to somehow brutalize our neighbor or take up the banner of the latest conspiracy theory to prove how right I am and how wrong you are. The proclivity we seem to have to point blame, criticize, and even inflict harm as we more deeply embrace our sense of personal entitlement. The lack

of grace that feels so prevalent as we seem to have such little regard for the suffering ones – the same ones the Old Testament as well as the New lifted up as God’s dear ones. The suffering in Syria as war continues to ravage the lives of so many. The starving in Yemen. The never ending tensions between nations. The cruelty of the powerful segregating, punishing, and chipping away at what little is left of people’s dignity and sense of purpose.

Perhaps it’s just me and, if it is, I apologize but I just seem so much more aware of the stumps protruding from this earthly life’s ground this Advent season, marking places where life once thrived and hope flourished. They seem to stand out this year, mysteriously calling me to pay attention. Stumps that suggest a kind of glory that once was but is no more. Stumps that bear testimony to the fragility of life and the cost of human callousness.

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, writes Isaiah to an audience that also sensed the sorrow of stumps, in particular, the collapse of the once grand and powerful Davidic dynasty. It was a tree seemingly planted and nurtured by God himself. A tree that had its share of dry seasons and catastrophic events but somehow, by the grace of God and the humility of King David’s faithfulness, it endured. Through it all it grew, tall and mighty. The envy of nations! The jewel of every forest! It felt secure, safe, impenetrable, and permanent.

Even this tree, however, was felled by the ravages of nations rising up against nations. Even this tree was no match for the disease of greed and faithlessness.

The tree was toppled, carted away, burned like firewood, leaving nothing but a lifeless stump to bear witness to a glorious past. It’s difficult to hope when such magnificence is toppled. It’s difficult to believe when the Gardener, who once nurtured it, seems

to have deserted his post. It's difficult to muster up enthusiasm when all you see is a rotting stump. In fact, maybe, on our own, it's impossible.

'A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.' A tiny shoot, a slender green plant sprouting from a lifeless remnant! Wow. Is this what we are supposed to place our hope in? It seems so ridiculous! How could something so tiny, so vulnerable be our salvation?! A passing leg rubbing against it could easily break it off! A hungry animal could mindlessly snatch it up as a snack! It will take some doing to notice such a wee little shoot so easy to miss, so easy to dismiss.

As tiny as it is, however, it has one big thing going for it...the spirit. The spirit, the breath of God shall rest on it, promises Isaiah. The spirit will give it wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. Yes, even tiny shoots become formidable when the spirit gets involved.

So take note, my friends. Let the stump driven yearnings of our hearts make our eyes keen and put our senses on high alert. Let this image given to us by Isaiah, guide our search. This is the way of the spirit - stirring life from hopeless stumps, transforming bread and juice into an eternal meal, using things like a vulnerable tiny shoot to topple the mighty, awakening a new day by way of an infant's cry echoing down through the ages from a cattle's stall.

It sort of goes against the grain of everything we've been conditioned to look for this time of year - the stunning, the dazzling, the flashing, the kind of stuff you couldn't ignore even if you tried! What irony to think that it's just the opposite of where real hope resides. What danger it alerts us to as it reminds us of how easy it is to overlook.

Makes the search hard, doesn't it? Yes, really hard but, if

you're feeling anything like I'm feeling it's exactly what we need. This is not a time for life's dead stumps to have their way with us. This is a time for small albeit spirit induced sightings of new life *to trigger new shoots of life even in us* so that we might find not just the strength but also the enthusiasm to pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, re-engage our energies, and re-invest our convictions in this Holy One whose dwelling among us will surely be glorious!

To God alone be all the glory! Amen.