

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. ² The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—³ ... ¹⁰ In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be glorious.

Thirty-seven years ago, Yellowstone National Park experienced the largest wildfire in its history. Tens of millions of trees were destroyed; over three quarters of a million acres were scorched. The devastation was so complete in some areas that experts didn't know when or even if the forests would come back. What should be done? The Park Service decided to reseed in selected areas; but no sooner had their fledgling efforts begun when an amazing thing happened. While the fires destroyed the trees, they also jump-started the seeds that had fallen into the ashes. Shoots were springing up. Blackened areas were turning green. Today, there is little evidence that a fire had ever taken place. God, rather than man, brought Yellowstone back better than before.

The people of Isaiah's day might have felt as though they were experiencing the effects of a devastating forest fire. Their enemy, the Assyrians, had swept through Israel like a blazing inferno. They pillaged and plundered, seized and looted. Then, to add insult to injury, they cut down their trees. Not only had the Israelites lost the harvest they hoped they would reap from their hard work; now their trees would not be fruitful for years to come. While the Assyrians were directly responsible for this devastation, the Israelites really had only themselves to blame. You see, the Lord had sent the Assyrians to punish the Israelites for their idolatry. Led by evil kings such as Ahab, the people had rejected the one true God and were worshipping false gods. So, God used the Assyrians like a rod to discipline his wayward children. God's purpose was to call his people to repent so that he could restore them. Unfortunately, the Israelites stubbornly refused. They continued to stomp on God even as they were being trampled by the Assyrians. In a classic case of “If I can't get back at the person who hurt me, I'll hurt someone weaker than I am” the Israelites lashed out at their own people. They took advantage of the poor. They trampled on the rights of the needy. They preyed on widows and orphans.

Since the Israelites would not repent, God did not relent. Rather, he turned up the heat. Isaiah warned that far worse consequences would follow if the people did not turn from their evil ways. Sadly, the majority did not heed Isaiah's warning. Yet, not everyone in Israel was an idolater who arrogantly rejected God and his Word. There were a faithful few who refused to bow down to Baal. Yet, these God-fearing people were hurting. Their current situation was bleak; the future didn't look any brighter. Many despaired; some were ready to give up, thinking that the Lord had abandoned them. That's when the Lord stepped in and sent Isaiah to proclaim a message of hope. Isaiah declared, **“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit”** (Isa. 11:1).

In so many words, Isaiah was encouraging God's people to lift up their heads and hearts and look beyond their present circumstances. He pointed them to God's promises. For instance, God promised Adam and Eve at the fall that he would send a Savior to crush the power of the devil. The Lord promised Abraham that one of his descendants would be the Seed who would redeem all people. God promised David that one of his sons would sit on his throne and that His kingdom would last forever. God had not forgotten any of these promises. In his own time and way, the Lord would fulfill his promise to send a Savior.

Isaiah described the promised Savior in word pictures that any Jew could easily understand. Specifically, he describes the coming Messiah as a shoot and a Branch. Recalling their history as God's chosen people, the Israelites knew that their greatest king was David, the youngest son of Jesse. The Bible tells us that David was a man after the Lord's own heart. Filled with the Holy Spirit, David went from shepherding his father's flocks to commanding Israel's army. Under David's leadership, Israel became the greatest nation on earth. Sadly, the glory of Israel under David and Solomon was now a distant memory. This once proud nation that had flourished like a mighty oak tree was now reduced to a lowly stump. Even the most devout Jew found it hard to believe that their nation could ever be restored to its former glory.

Looks can be deceiving. While ordinary stumps remain dead and lifeless; the stump of Jesse would not. By the power of our Almighty and gracious God, a virgin would give birth to a son; a shoot would come up from the seemingly dead stump of Jesse. Jesus was the perfect fulfillment of all the prophecies concerning the Messiah. His parents, Mary and Joseph, were both from the house and line of David. Royal blood flowed

through his veins. Yet, Jesus was not born in a palace; rather, he came into this world in a stable in Bethlehem. This tender shoot grew up in Nazareth, rather than Jerusalem, the royal city of David. Do you recall Nathanael's reaction when Philip told him that he had found the Messiah in that poorly regarded village in Galilee? He said, **"Can anything good come from Nazareth?"** (Jn. 1:46).

Yet from such humble and even despised beginnings came the Savior of the nations, the King of kings, and the Lord of lords. At Jesus' baptism, his heavenly Father declared, **"This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased"** (Mt. 3:17). At his baptism, the perfect Son of God was anointed with the Holy Spirit who equipped Jesus with divine gifts so that he could carry out his work of salvation. Jesus has divine wisdom. Jesus knows and understands all things including the deepest mysteries of God. As our Wonderful Counselor, Jesus gives us the best advice. After all, what better advice is there than God's inerrant Word? Jesus also has the power to bless us. He uses it to protect us from our enemies and to carry out his plans for our good. Even though Jesus is God, he did not use his divine power to his own advantage. Rather, Jesus humbled himself and became obedient to his Father's will. **"[Jesus] did not come to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many"** (Matt. 20:28).

Jesus came to save us from the consequences of our sins. Because we are poor, miserable sinners, we had absolutely no ability to make ourselves right with God. There's nothing that we could do to earn God's favor that we should live with him. Rather, we deserve to die and suffer the everlasting torment of hell where the fire never goes out. But in his love, God sent Jesus to snatch us from the fires of hell. Jesus lived a perfect life and then credited his righteousness to our accounts. Jesus then went through hell on the cross so that we would never be without God's love. Because of his perfect life and innocent death, God has declared us "Not guilty!" St. Paul beautifully sums up what God has done for us: **"God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that through him we might become the righteousness of God"** (2 Cor. 5:21).

Jesus has ascended into heaven where he rules over all things. Indeed, all authority on heaven and earth has been given to him. Jesus is our righteous King who rules with justice. Unlike earthly rulers, Jesus does not judge by what he sees or hears. Jesus doesn't need the testimony of human witnesses. Unlike humans who can judge only by outward appearances, Jesus can see what is in our hearts. While human judges are fallible, Jesus never makes mistakes. He will not let the guilty go free nor will the innocent be wrongly punished. What does God see when he looks at the hearts of believers? He sees Jesus; he sees Jesus' righteousness. What great comfort it is to you and me to know that we are God's dearly loved, forgiven children! That means that we don't have anything to fear when Jesus returns to judge the world. Unbelievers, on the other hand, have no such comfort. Without faith in Christ, they will be judged according to God's unforgiving standard of perfection. When God ends their time of grace, those who reject Jesus will find themselves forever burning in the unquenchable fires of hell.

In his prophecy, Isaiah tells us that Jesus will bring justice. He also brings peace. Isaiah describes this peace in terms of predators peacefully coexisting with their prey. In our sinful world, the wolf preys on the helpless lamb, the lion stalks the goat. But when Jesus comes, hostility will cease. Former enemies will live side by side in peace. Even a little baby won't have to fear the cobra's nest. Yet, as we look at the world, we don't see the peace that Isaiah is talking about. How then, are we to understand Isaiah's words? The key is found in verse nine which says, **"They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain."** This verse is talking about the holy Christian church; it's talking about you and me! Think about it. All of us have experienced God's love firsthand. Even though we constantly sin and fall miserably short of God's glory, God forgives us for Jesus' sake. God has given us his Word and the Lord's Supper to strengthen our faith. God's undeserved love motivates us to forgive one another, to turn the other cheek, to love our neighbors, even our enemies, as ourselves. In short, the gospel motivates and enables us to live in peace and harmony with our fellow human beings.

Dear friends, we live in a world full of injustice and precious little peace. Yet, we need not despair or lose hope. As we prepare our hearts to celebrate the birth of the Prince of Peace, we know that we have peace with God that surpasses all human understanding. In this season of Advent, we also look forward to Jesus' second coming when our righteous King will judge with perfect justice. Let us give all honor, glory and praise to Jesus, the Root of Jesse who makes all things new. Amen.