

Macalester Plymouth

UNITED CHURCH

“Hope from a Stump”

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The season of Advent begins in the Hebrew Scriptures with the words of the prophets imagining a different world is possible. Hear these words of hope from the Prophet Isaiah, chapter 11, verses 1 to 10. This is from the Common English Bible translation.

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots.

The LORD’s spirit will rest upon him,

 a spirit of wisdom and understanding,

 a spirit of planning and strength,

 a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.

He will delight in fearing the LORD.

He won’t judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay.

He will judge the needy with righteousness,

 and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.

He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;

 by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,

 and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

The wolf will live with the lamb,

 and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;

 the calf and the young lion will feed together,

 and a little child will lead them.

The cow and the bear will graze.

 Their young will lie down together,

 and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole;

 toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den.

They won’t harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.

 The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,

 just as the water covers the sea.

On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.

May these words be to us our light and our life. Thanks be to God.

When we moved into our house 6 years ago, there was a beautiful old three-story magnolia tree here. It was one of the first trees to flower each year defiantly asserting its white bursts of delight out into our winter worn lives. It was the first sign of a season of color and new life. Four years ago, the magnolia developed a horrible fungus and hardly leafed out let alone blossom. The tree doctor was called and said, sadly, it could not be saved. So, our beloved three story magnolia came down. We loved that tree. It left this huge empty spot in our yard and in our hearts. The next season we planted a tiny dogwood close to the spot of the old tree. We hoped one day it would bring the first signs of Spring into our windows as well. Then, a year ago, as we tended to this new vulnerable tree, we noticed a shoot coming up from the stump of the old magnolia! What seemed dead and gone was moving, growing, alive again. It felt like a miracle! “A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse.” I am not usually such a literalist, but I know the hope of which the prophet Isaiah speaks because of this shoot: that nothing is ever truly cut off from God, that death does not have the last word, and God’s promise of new life is being fulfilled even when death is all you see.

The prophet’s hope, our Advent hope begins with a stump. Isaiah speaks to a community that feels cut off. It is a community living in exile in Babylonia, disconnected from its past and an uncertain future. Its former vitality, its identity as a nation, its daily rituals and faith practices were disrupted. Its connection to its roots, the kingdom of David and his father Jesse, seems far away. Survival was their focus. They found ways to cope while in exile, but found it easy to forget who they were, and whose they were. And yet, there in the desolation of their

displaced lives, where they only saw a dead stump, the prophet saw fertile ground where God had planted a vision of hope.

Joel Elkes was born in a Russian Jewish family. After World War I, they fled to Kovno, Lithuania. When Joel was 17 years old, his parents, sensing the threat posed by the Third Reich, sent him to England to study medicine. There, he began the research that made him a highly honored pioneer of modern Psychiatry. He was the person who invented the first pharmaceutical relief for schizophrenia. He was an amazing scientist and went on to become the head of the Psychiatry department for a decade at Johns Hopkins University. The Nazis occupied Lithuania. His parents were right. Eventually, the Nazis herded all of Kovno's Jews into a ghetto. Joel's father was elected leader of the ghetto. Joel lost touch with his family during that time and only after the war did he learn about the horrors of the Kovno ghetto and then the fact that most of his family was murdered at Auschwitz. Thirty nine members of his family in all were lost leaving Joel and his sister alone in the world. Parker Palmer, one of my go to sources of wisdom these days, was friends with Joel and described Joel this way. "In spite of [his past] or because of it, Joel was a steady source of light and life to everyone who knew him." Palmer tells the story of being on retreat with Joel, in a group of about 25 people trying to figure out how to pick up the pieces after 9-11 and figure out what to do next. After listening to the conversation for a while, Joel quietly said, "We must learn to Garden in the dark." We must learn to garden in the dark.

To me, this phrase, this image, reflects both the voice of the prophet and the spirit of where we find ourselves this Advent. We know there is still uncertainty ahead. But we are still fertile soil. The seeds of new life are already planted. Even though the wind blows cold and the days are short, the seeds of the Spirit can be tended. With courage and care, we can still be gardeners during this time, tending to the future that is trying to be born out of this tragic year. We must continue to garden in the dark as all people of faith have learned to do.

The prophet's poetry describes the fruits of the garden God's people tend. It is a vision of the upside down of the way things are, where God's peace defies the gravity of violence, where God's tender mercy lifts up the downtrodden, and where love leads the way.

Isaiah points us towards the sprouts of a time of peace where the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the goat, the calf and the lion will all live side by side. Isaiah imagines the budding of love, where leaders wear the belt of righteousness and faithfulness instead of the self-importance of a sword.

Isaiah dreams of the tender shoots of compassion, where our children, our future, will be safe from danger, will be able to play again and will lead us.

The transformation promised is embodied in a leader, this shoot from the family tree of Jesse, inheritor of David's kingdom, and a sign to the people. Though Isaiah is not talking specifically about Jesus, Christians have noticed the similarities between Isaiah's vision and the teachings of Jesus. As Christians, we see in Jesus, the first fruits of God's carefully tended garden and his love as a foretaste of the feast to come. In Jesus is our hope for a whole and healed, post-

pandemic world. The prophet's message is, keep the faith, keep hope alive, keep gardening in the dark.

It might seem strange to think of gardening on November 29 in Minnesota. And yet, people of faith are spiritual gardeners. We see the fertile ground in people who are cast aside, we see seeds of possibilities where others lose hope, we trust that something is coming when others keep looking back. This waiting we are doing is not hopeless. When wait you believe something good is coming. Gardening in the dark might not make sense to other people, but keeping the faith is a form of active resistance.

In her poem, *The Seven of Pentacles*, the poet Margie Piercy reminds us what it is like to garden. Inspired by the image on a tarot card, she describes what I think it is like to garden in the dark and illuminates hope.

Under a sky the color of pea soup
she is looking at her work growing away there
actively, thickly like grapevines or pole beans
as things grow in the real world, slowly enough.
If you tend them properly, if you mulch, if you water,
if you provide birds that eat insects a home and winter food,
if the sun shines and you pick off caterpillars,
if the praying mantis comes and the ladybugs and the bees,
then the plants flourish, but at their own internal clock.

Connections are made slowly, sometimes they grow underground.

You cannot tell always by looking what is happening.

More than half the tree is spread out in the soil under your feet.

Penetrate quietly as the earthworm that blows no trumpet.

Fight persistently as the creeper that brings down the tree.

Spread like the squash plant that overruns the garden.

Gnaw in the dark and use the sun to make sugar.

Weave real connections, create real nodes, build real houses.

Live a life you can endure: Make love that is loving.

Keep tangling and interweaving and taking more in,
a thicket and bramble wilderness to the outside but to us
interconnected with rabbit runs and burrows and lairs.

Live as if you liked yourself, and it may happen:

reach out, keep reaching out, keep bringing in.

This is how we are going to live for a long time: not always,
for every gardener knows that after the digging, after
the planting, after the long season of tending and growth, the harvest comes.

May your hope be rekindled this Advent season. Amen.