

Isaiah 11:1-10  
Creekside COB  
December 9, 2007  
*The Second Sunday in Advent*

### **“Stumps and Shoots”**

I know what you are going to think. You'll think I have become a middle-aged grump. Why will you draw this conclusion? I have an issue with a beloved children's book that marked its fortieth anniversary last year. Had it been in print when I was a child I might appreciate it today. But it wasn't, so I don't.

The book is, *The Giving Tree*. In case you don't know the story or have forgotten it, a boy and a tree became friends. When the boy wanted something, he went and told the tree. Since it was a “giving tree” the tree did what it could to grant the boy's wishes. Their happiness was entwined. What made the boy happy made the tree happy.

One day the boy went to the orchard and said to the tree, *“I want money. Can you give me money?”* “I don't carry cash,” the tree said. “But I know what I can do,” said the tree. “Pick my apples, boy, and go sell them. Then you'll have money.” And so he did, and the tree was happy.

The years passed and the boy grew up. He returned to the tree, and it was overjoyed to see him. *“I want a house. Can you give me a house?”* he asked. The tree said it couldn't give him a house, but if he wanted, he could cut off its branches for lumber to *build* a house. And so he did, and the tree was happy. More years passed. The boy came back to the tree and said, “Tree, I want a boat. Can you give me a boat?” The tree said, “Cut down my trunk and build a boat out of it.” And so he did, and the tree was happy.

The years flew like a weaver's shuttle, and the boy, now a frail, old man returned to the tree. It had been such a long time, and the tree was overjoyed to see him. The boy was too old to build another house. He had long since given up sailing. "I'm tired and weary and need a place to rest," the boy said. Though there was nothing left of the tree but a stump, it loved the boy and was still eager to make him happy. The tree said, "You can sit on my stump and rest." And so he did, and the tree was happy. THE END.

I don't want to be a grouch, but what is the message of *The Giving Tree*? Is it saying that codependency is a good thing? Take and take until there is nothing left to take? Give and give until you have nothing left to give? By the end of the story, the boy and tree were both depleted and exhausted. The boy was depressed and wondering what had become of his life, and the tree was stumped. Instead of calling the book, *The Giving Tree*, it should have been titled, *The Boy Who Grabbed Everything He Could*.

The tree loved the boy, but not enough to tell the spoiled brat that material things could never satisfy him. One writer called *The Giving Tree* "... a nursery tale for the "me" generation, a primer for narcissism, a catechism of exploitation that can be cataloged with popular hits like, *"I Want It All and I Want It Now!"*

If the publishers should decide to print a new edition of *The Giving Tree*, here is what I would suggest. The tree would say to the boy, "You've been sitting on my stump long enough. Find someplace else to rest because something is happening to me." From a crack in the weathered, old stump, a brave, green, delicate little shoot of a new tree emerges.

At the very least it would be a protest against the relentless march of time that wears everything to nothing. At its best, it suggests hope -- not a run-of-the-mill sort that is only bold enough to say, "I hope it doesn't rain on the parade." I mean a resolute, will-not-be-denied hope that says, "No matter how dark and desperate life may be, no matter how frightening the future -

**- hope remains, for God is forever present, and God will not disappoint us.”**

**A stump is a symbol of the world’s condition. But the story we tell every Advent says there is something more in store. Look closely and you’ll see a green shoot of hope.**

***A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.***

**(Isaiah 11: 1-2)**

**These are the words the prophet Isaiah spoke to the defeated and dejected people of God. Things could hardly have been worse. Judah was in the crosshairs of Sennacherib and his massive Assyrian army. The Northern Kingdom-- King David’s kingdom had already been demolished by the Assyrians and its people taken into exile. David’s kingdom was reduced to a stump field. The people of Judah saw the smoke and heard the distant clanging of armor and knew that they were next.**

**Isaiah told Judah that it would be punished for being unfaithful to the covenant God had made with them. The fate awaiting them was for their failure to practice justice and righteousness. Judah found itself in a dark, dismal situation, desperately looking for a branch of hope to hang on to.**

**In her book, *Plan B*, Anne Lamott writes about how sick she is over what has become of our country in recent years and the arrogance of its leadership. Her friends tell her not to get so worked up. “It’s futile to stew over it,” they tell her. But Anne Lamott refuses to use the word futile. She calls the challenge of changing directions, “*nearly impossible*.” She says, “I can take nearly impossible over futile any day.”**

**A change in Judah's fortunes was nearly impossible. But starting with chapter 9, Isaiah sounds a different refrain. There would be hardship and loss and suffering, and their faith in God would be tested to the max. But their future was not futile. Isaiah oriented the people toward hope. *A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.***

**The Getty Museum has a painting by an unknown artist from the year 1510. At the bottom of the painting is Jesse, the father of David. He is in a reclining pose with his weight on one elbow. His expression is relaxed and serene -- no small feat considering there are roots and a tree trunk growing from him. At the end of one branch is David and others in the lineage of David. At the top is Mary holding the One who meets all hopes and fears -- Jesus Emmanuel, come to free ransomed captive Israel.**

**The Messiah, the shoot from the stump of Jesse shall be full of God's spirit. He shall possess wisdom, understanding, counsel and might. He will be a just ruler. He will stand up for the poor. With his coming there shall be an overwhelming knowledge of God in every person and creature. Everything broken will be mended. Everything separated by sin shall be brought together. The unity and harmony of life that we turned into mincemeat shall be restored.**

**And the realists among us are thinking, "Yea, right. Next you'll say that wolves and lambs will play together, and lions and calves will take naps together."**

**A Western visitor to a Soviet era zoo was amazed to find an exhibit with a little lamb resting comfortably beside a timber wolf. A sign above the exhibit extolled this example of peaceful coexistence. He asked the zookeeper how this miraculous thing could be achieved in the Soviet Union. He replied, "Its perfectly simple if you have a fresh lamb every morning,"**

**Children playing with poisonous snakes? Nations will stop inventing new ways to kill their enemies? It sounds swell, but its just poetry. Inside our Christmas cards it will say, "Peace on earth and goodwill to all." But we won't read that in the paper.**

**We make half-hearted attempts at praying for peace, but a voice inside says, “Stick to the practical and save the poetry for Christmas cards and Christmas Eve.**

**As Christmas approaches, people go along with the seasonal hype. We give ourselves permission to be sentimental and nostalgic. We take the awesome message of God becoming wreathed in the flesh and blood of Jesus, and say, “Christmas is for children.”**

**Don’t get me wrong. I’m not a grump. Really, I’m not. I love Christmas lights and music. I love the memories of Christmases past and the traditions surrounding them as much as anyone else, but the poetry of stumps and shoots is what gives us hope, and who among us doesn’t need a fresh infusion of hope?**

**There are sixteen days until Christmas, but some of us will be more mindful of an empty chair at the table and silence instead of a familiar voice. There are sixteen days until Christmas, but some here today will be thinking that for the first time in your life, you will have Christmas without a parent. There are sixteen days until Christmas, but you’re been hit with a tidal wave of hurt, and you’re wondering if you will ever heal. Just sixteen days -- that’s all -- and poverty keeps growing in our land of plenty, foreclosures multiply, and the fiasco war goes on with no end in sight, while TV commercials tell us to show that special someone how much we love them by purchasing a Lexus with a big, red ribbon on top. And we wonder, “What’s become of God?”**

**I can’t speak for you, but I could use a major dose of poetry. The Harvard child psychiatrist, Robert Coles, wrote a book called, *The Spiritual Life of Children*. In it he tells about an interview he did with a six-year old girl named Ruby Bridges. She was one of the first children to integrate the New Orleans public schools. For months, federal marshals had to escort Ruby through lines of angry parents who shouted insults, racial slurs, and threats of violence. At the end of the school day, it happened all over again.**

Almost every white child had been pulled out of the school, and Ruby spent the day in class by herself. Coles heard about Ruby and went to New Orleans to interview her and her parents. He asked Ruby's teacher how the child could tolerate such treatment. This is what the teacher said: "I was standing in the classroom looking out the window. I saw Ruby coming down the street with marshals on both sides of her. As usual, the crowd was there shouting. A woman spat at Ruby, and Ruby smiled at her. A man shook his fist at her and she smiled. She walked up the steps, turned around and smiled one more time at everyone. She told one of the marshals that she prayed for all those people every night before she went to bed.

When Coles interviewed Ruby he asked about her prayers. "Yes," Ruby said, "I do pray for those people." Coles asked, "Why would you pray for people who are so mean to you and say such bad things about you?" "Because Mama said I should." Coles kept pressing her and Ruby said, "I go to church every Sunday, and we're told to pray for people, even bad people. Mama says its true. My minister says the same thing. 'We don't have to worry,' he says. He came to our house and he say, 'God is watching over us.' He says, 'If I forgive the people and smile at them and pray for them, God will keep a good eye on everything and he'll protect us.'"

Coles asked Ruby if she thought the minister was on the right track. "Oh, yes," she said. "I'm sure God knows what's happening. God's got a lot to worry about, but there's bad trouble here. God can't help but notice. He may not do anything right now, but there will come a day, like they say in church, there will come a day. You can count on it. That's what they say in church."

*The wolf shall live with the lamb.... The calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them.*

Survey the landscape of the world at the close of 2007 and you'll see them -- stump fields -- the stumps of human schemes we thought would give us what we needed. But a shoot shall grow from the stump of Jesse. That wonderful day has come in the

**birth of Jesus, and as Christmas approaches we will sing and celebrate the difference his coming has made. But as little Ruby Bridges testified, “There will come a day, and we can count on it.” A day when the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord. A day when there will truly be peace on earth and goodwill for everyone, and no one shall live in want.**

**Its not here yet, but the old poetic vision we hear at Advent is just what we need to inspire us to pray for it and work for it. And that, my friends, is our saving, sustaining hope.**