



## WE WILL NOT BE STUMPED

December 4, 2016, Second Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 11:1-10

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Hum. Fizz. Slurp. Growl. Crackling. Jingle. These, one and all, are onomatopoeic words, words that imitate the sound of what they represent. When I hear the Isaiah text Will just read, the most important word to me is another onomatopoeic word, “stump.” I am not sure if it quite fits the category as closely as the previous words, which literally make the sound they represent, but the word “stump” certainly brings to mind what it represents. The word sounds stunted and squat and lifeless, just like the remains of what is left behind when a once majestic and glorious tree, with a long trunk and branches festooned with green leaves reaching toward the heavens, is cut down.

Now you may ask how in the world with this text filled with delightful words of hope including those we use in our baptismal prayer, “wisdom and understanding,” “counsel and might,” and “spirit of knowledge,” have I landed my attention on “stump.” Some may say it is because I do enjoy the occasional pessimistic moment. Half a dozen years ago there were several members of the staff who referred to me by the nickname, Johnny Dark. But I do not think that is why I gravitate to the stump in this text. Some may think I am playing some verbal sleight of hand because the name of our President-elect rhymes with stump, but I am not doing that either.

I am drawn to the word not for its potential pessimism, or any rhyming association, but because it grounds in reality the shimmering words of promise we also heard read, in reality. I like rainbows and sunshine and endless days of joy as much as the next person. But when somebody starts eloquently pontificating about with such words, I want to know how the heck they relate to the very imperfect,



muddling-through-our-days existence in which we actually live. If some line of connection cannot be drawn, please do not waste my time with pretty pictures of the peaceable kingdom. Daydreams all too easily slip through our fingers. When we are frustrated by our work, terrified by what is going on across the globe, worried about our children, and clamoring for some center of gravity to which we can cling, cotton candy in the air will not do the trick.

But, a stump. You can grab a hold of a stump. The stump in this text, “the stump of Jesse” refers to the lineage of the Davidic Kings, Jesse being David’s father. What started out so promisingly with a faithful and bright, young shepherd king, eventually led to a divided nation on the verge of being dragged into exile. Against God’s better judgment, after much pleading, God gave Israel the monarchy they so strenuously sought, and in the end it led to immense failure.

These words from Isaiah are spoken to a people who carry around the taste of failure and anxiety over the future in their mouths. They know all about the stump. They know the dream that has died. They know the nation about to be consumed. They know lives defined by upheaval. If you talk to them about hope and you do not mention the stump sitting before them, they will never hear you.

We all have stumps in our lives. Dreams denied. Dreams eternally deferred. Things in our lives that make us ache and hunger over what has been lost, or what could have been, or what should have been. Relationships that have failed. Loved ones who have died. Visions for our lives that have never materialized the way we thought they would. Yes, we have stumps, each and every one of us. And we as a nation are in the midst of a stump moment. Regardless for whom we chose to vote last month, we find ourselves living in a painful political and civic reality; what was referred to in the New York Times magazine as a “cold civil war.” Anger and distrust are running rampant from our halls of power, to our street corners, to our Thanksgiving Dinner tables. Fear and anxiety are the zeitgeist of our country. It feels as if there is no common center in which we stand together. It feels as if we are a nation at war with ourselves. Yes, there are stumps in each of our lives, and a stump we share as a nation in this time.



When we find ourselves facing a stump it feels as if God has let us down in some way; that God has been somehow absent in some important element of our lives. I am sure that is how the nation of Israel felt when they watched the monarchy crumble and their nation collapse. This text from Isaiah owns the reality of the existence of those stumps in our lives. But it also contradicts the notion that God could ever be absent in any element of our lives.

Our feelings to the contrary, the holy one does not ever retreat for a single moment from our side. In the midst of loss, our perception of God's presence can get paved over. As if a dark and lifeless parking lot has covered a verdant garden, once alive and full of possibility. But it is amazing what is below the surface of that black bitumen; what is not seen, but still at work in our lives, as individuals and as a community. Life is germinating below the surface.

Life that will push through the darkness that covers and crack its way to the surface, green and alive, tender shoots of growth that push their way through the pavement of our clouded perceptions.

God is always at work with us and within us, even and especially in the times and place of our lives that can appear so bleak. Sometimes working to repurpose the very mistakes we have made into something saving and true.

God knew the creation of a monarchy was not the answer for the nation of Israel. But the people begged and begged for one. God eventually relents and they are given a monarchy. But when the monarchy fails, God is not done with the nation, God is not finished with seeking to give Israel what it needs, what we all need.

Through Isaiah, God brings word of a new king, a new kind of king, a radical reinterpretation of kingship, of power. God defines for us what is needed even if we are slow to come to the party and understand exactly what we need. Israel thought they needed a warrior king for their nation to prosper and be safe in perpetuity. In the wake of that failure they may have felt that God had failed them



when in reality what had happened is that their expectations about what God should do had failed. Whether you are thrilled with results of the election or broken by them or someplace in between, one and all, we know that this is not the social and civic climate to which God is calling us.

What we need to know as well is that God is not done with any of us, regardless of political perspective, and not done with where we are being led, as people, as a community as a nation.

This time of year is a season of expectations. Children dream of Christmas morning loot, piles of presents that mirror lengthy and extensive wish lists. Parents strive to create perfect memories for their children of what they hope will be a magical season. Families gather around large tables in hopes of bathing in the warm candlelight of a meal with food inspired by Martha Stewart and feelings inspired by Norman Rockwell. In the church we have our own set of expectations of the Saint Nicholas Party, the Candlelight Carol service, the Deacon Christmas Party and the Christmas Eve pageant, and the arrival of a savior, God in our midst.

And the one thing I can guarantee you about these expectations is they will not be met, at least not in the way we envision them in our minds. The wrong presents may be purchased. The roast may be dry and overcooked. Aunt Sally and Grandpa will engage in their annual political debate. Santa Claus may show up late for the Deacon Christmas Party and the girl playing Mary in the pageant may get strep throat. And in the midst of all of it, there will be wonderful and surprising blessings we cannot yet envision.

This is also the time of year when expectations lost are particularly poignant. We cannot help but notice the empty chair at the table that should be filled by a loved one who died too soon. Estrangements and ruptured family relationships cast a shadow over what is supposed to be a time of harmony, as the year comes to a close, cherished goals for our lives will go unmet.



Yes, there are stumps. All kinds of stumps to be found. But Isaiah's words from God speak directly to us, particularly when bleakness prevails. The Jewish scholar, Abraham Heschel, wrote, "The prophet is a person who, living in dismay, has the power to transcend his dismay."<sup>1</sup>

We are given word of a glorious Messiah on the way. Let's hear the words again, because they are so evocative and beautiful and because they are the one true hope we can all share.

"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 on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

"The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

"On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious."

As I said, the words are evocative and beautiful. But I also believe they confound expectation. The Israelites were certainly continually surprised by how God was at work in their midst. And the older I get the thing in which I am most confident is that God will continue to confound our expectations at every turn.



So what do we watch for in this season? What should we expect to see? I have no clue. But what I am betting my entire life on is that each and every stump in our lives and in our life together is yet another location and opportunity in which God is at work. Perhaps at the moment solely beneath the surface, but at work nonetheless, preparing the soil for healing, for new life, for abundance beyond our comprehension. There are no final conclusions that end with a dead-end stump. God is in the business of bringing new life in all places, in even the most unexpected places.

*Thanks be to God. Amen*

<sup>1</sup> Heschel, Abraham, *Between God and Man*, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1959, p. 240.

