

“O Root of Jesse ”

Isaiah 11:1,10

December 8,2019
Advent

Second Sunday in

There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.... In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples—of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious.

Christmas trees are a popular part of our celebration at this time of year. Legend has it that Martin Luther, after walking through a forest on Christmas Eve and seeing the moonlight on the branches of a pine tree, brought the tree into his house, put candles and other decorations on the branches, and thus invented the Christmas tree. It was a Lutheran pastor, Rev. Heinrich Schwan of Cleveland, Ohio, who brought the tradition of the Christmas tree from the old country and became the first pastor to put a Christmas tree in a church. He was ridiculed in the press and by some of his own members of his own congregation for being a “tree worshiper.”

Some may think, like those at Pastor Schwan’s time, that trees should have no part in our churches or in our homes at Christmas because they are secular in nature and have nothing to do with the celebration of Christ’s coming. I disagree. And it’s not just because I’m such a sucker for tradition. There are trees all over the place in the salvation story in Holy Scriptures about the coming of Christ.

First, it was a tree that got us all in trouble in the first place – the tree of the knowledge of good and evil in the Garden of Eden. Adam and Eve were given only one commandment to follow – not to eat the fruit from that tree. But, after Satan’s temptation caused them to doubt the Word of God and to judge for themselves what they could do, both Eve and Adam sinned.

Secondly, it was another tree – the tree of life – which showed what was lost because of the fall into sin. Adam and Eve were separated from God because of their sin and expelled from the Garden of Eden. The Word of God says, “[God] placed the cherubim and the flaming sword that turned every way to guard the way to the tree of life.” No longer would Adam and Eve have the opportunity to eat the fruit of that tree and live forever as God intended. They were dust and would return to dust once again because of their sin and forfeited eternal life.

The result of Adam and Eve’s actions have been passed down through the generations and inherited by us. We are, by nature, sinful and unclean. We are, by action, sinners who failed to do all of the good which God requires and who have so often done that which God forbids. Our sin separates us from the presence of a holy God and the way to the tree of life has been closed to us.

But the Lord had promised a Savior, one who would crush the serpent’s head, bring forgiveness of sin and reconciliation between God and humanity, and open the way to the tree of life again. Throughout the centuries, the people of God waited and waited. Prophets spoke of this Coming One. One of these prophecies made mention of a tree. How could a tree have anything to do with the coming of the Savior?

Isaiah writes, "In that day the root of Jesse, who shall stand as a signal for the peoples – of him shall the nations inquire, and his resting place shall be glorious." (Isaiah 11:10) Leave it to the Lord to make a homely root His banner, His flag, His royal standard. At this, all kings will be silent and all nation shall bow? Roots are best left unseen, underground, invisibly drawing up nutrients from the soil, feeding the branches which produce leaves and fruit. Expose the root and the whole tree dies. But cut down the tree even to a stump and it will return, so long as the root is alive.

What is this Root of Jesse? It is named for Jesse, the father of King David. It is God's promise that the throne of King David, arguably the most important of all the kings of Israel, would endure forever, that there would always be a son of David sitting on his throne. That promise is the root of Israel's existence.

Things look pretty bleak for the people of God and this promise for quite a while. After the reign of King Solomon, the nation was divided into two kingdoms: Israel to the north and Judah to the south. In the coming years, the people would forsake the covenant with God by worshiping other gods and following a different kind of morality. Finally, in the year 722 BC, the nation of Assyria overthrew the northern kingdom of Israel and took its population into exile.

Following that, the southern kingdom of Judah, despite having the Temple of God in the city of David, was overrun by Babylon. Zedekiah would be the last descendent of David to reign as king. He would be captured by Babylonian troops, forced to watch his sons killed before him, and then be blinded and taken into captivity. Jerusalem and the Temple would be burned and demolished. In effect, the tree of Israel was cut down and reduced to a lifeless stump by her Babylonian captors. Yet the promise still lived in the Root. From seeming death, life would come. As Isaiah proclaims, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit."

It's reminiscent at this time of year when shopping for Christmas trees. Unless you go up and the mountains and cut your own tree (or commit the heresy of having an artificial tree), you pick a tree from a parking lot or a store. Row after row of trees, cut down by the chainsaw of Christmas commerce, leaving a lifeless stump in the ground somewhere. If you have cut down trees before, you know what happens to those stumps. They sprout. It's hard to stop it. You have to kill the root, and when the root is the promise and love of God in His Son, you simply can't kill it. It always sprouts to life.

Just when King David's family tree seemed as good as dead, reduced to a stump with Judah carted off like a Christmas tree to adorn Babylon's living room, the promise of God sprouted forth in Israelite soil, in the obscure town of Nazareth, by the word of the angel to a young virgin girl, "You will conceive and bear a son, and you will call His name Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give to Him the throne of His father David, and He shall reign over the house of Jacob forever; and of His kingdom there will be no end."

This is King David's greater Son, the promised Son, and the successor to the throne. He is the shoot, the branch, the tree – the King in His Kingdom. He has come to free us from our sin and all that we, by our sin, have deserved. This is a serious matter. Our sin goes all the way to the root of our existence. Not only is our fruit bad

(the good actions we attempt to do), but the whole tree, roots and all, is bad. The ax of the Law must be laid to the root as John the Baptist says in our Gospel lesson for today. We cannot reform ourselves or repair ourselves. We must die and rise anew. It's the only way to save us. Since we are completely corrupted by sin, we must be grafted to a new root. We must be joined to the stump of Jesse, fed by the Root of Jesse, and nourished by the promise of God to save.

This brings us to another tree – the tree of the cross. God grafted His Root to our sin by nailing it to a cross. The Root of Jesse became a banner for the world to see. This is Jesus of Nazareth; David's son and David's Lord. As He says at the end of Revelation, "I am the root and offspring of David." He was lifted up on the tree of the cross as a banner for the nations to see. This is how the Lord God who created the heavens and earth deals with sin and restores sinful creatures to Himself. As Moses lifted up the bronze serpent in the wilderness to be a way of healing, so the Root of Jesse was lifted up on the tree of the cross to be the way of salvation. Here the serpent's head is crushed. Here is how God saves you and me from sin and death. He sets the ax of the Law against His own Root, His Son, and then joins you to His death. The cross is the meeting place of God and man, Law and Gospel, wrath and mercy. There the root absorbs your sin; there He feeds you His righteousness.

When you make a graft in the wood, you need to keep the graft moist so that the sap of the tree can flow into the branches and keep the tree alive or the graft and the branch will die. You and I were grafted into the Root of Jesse in our baptism. Don't let that graft dry out. Always keep it immersed in baptismal water by returning to your baptism regularly in repentance and faith. In your baptism, you can draw on His forgiveness to grant you peace; His life to live a God pleasing life; His salvation to support and encourage you along life's way.

You are living branches grafted to the living Root of Jesse, Jesus Christ. Apart from Him can do nothing but sin. Joined to Him, believing in Him, you not only can bear much fruit of love and good works but you will bear much fruit. You will live differently than you did in the past. You will do the good which God requires. You will reject the evil which God forbids.

There is yet one more tree to consider. In fact, it is a tree already mentioned which brings this whole story full circle. It is the tree of life. Forbidden by God to Adam and Eve and all their descendents because of sin, it is now available to you and me. By virtue of Jesus' resurrection from the dead to life again, the tree of life is no longer guarded to keep us out. As the well-known Easter hymn says, "death's dread angel sheathes the sword." Heaven is open to us and access to the tree of life has given to us. In the final verses of the final book of the Holy Bible, Revelation, we read, "Blessed are those who wash their robes, so that they may have the right to the tree of life ." (Revelation 22:14) The fruit from the tree of life is no longer withheld from us. We eat of it and we will live forever as God always intended for us to live.

And so in Advent, we wait. We pray. We sing. We watch. In the midst of death and destruction, we look for life and salvation. We pray to be delivered from Satan's tyranny and given victory over death by the Branch of Jesse. So let us stand and sing that prayer for deliverance (sing song).