

Unexpected Growth and Peace
Isaiah 11:1-10
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Advent 2, Year A
December 4, 2022 (St. Peter's)

We were just concluding an interesting Bible study among the “Cool Hudson Valley Churches” as Bill Levering named us- St. Peter's, Valatie, and Hudson. I had framed the questions in an inductive or sideways manner- *What's your favorite tree and do you have a tree story? What is the fiercest wild animal you have ever encountered? And the most gentle? Questions progressed all the way up to- Can a community be strong if it does not attend to the poor and oppressed? We then delved into this Isaiah text when Bill asked, Is Isaiah talking about Jesus?*

No, not really and yes- sort of. We know Isaiah, along with other prophets, like Jeremiah and Micah, painted a Prophetic expectation of the Reign of God. Isaiah boldly envisioned the character of rulers called by God- people of faithfulness, righteousness, and justice. And he pointed to an elusive vision when all nature would live in harmony- wolves with lambs, lions eating straw with oxen, and toddlers with a hand over the den of snakes. Any of us would shudder at that one!

And yet here we are in the church anticipating the birth of the Messiah. We read this text with an eye toward to the Coming One, and we do so humbly. Each Advent the Church reads the sacred story of Jesus coming from the lineage of David, who was the Son of Jesse. We sing “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Immanuel means God with us.

In solidarity with interfaith community, we know that God has a way of reaching out as God chooses. In the church, we are preparing for the birth of Jesus Christ. We can be inclusive as we celebrate our faith tradition. That is who we are.

“A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse.” The people were feeling besieged. Assyria was on the rise against them. They had more than their share of corrupt leadership, and the people Isaiah addressed were among the poor and oppressed. They needed a word of hope.

As Maya Angelou once sang when she came to Hudson Valley Community College as a guest speaker, “When it looked like the sun wasn’t gonna shine anymore, God put a rainbow in the clouds.”

Now, the word through the prophet Isaiah is- when it looked like all was desiccated and dead, new growth came forth instead. I wish we could hear Maya Angelou sing about a new shoot coming from the stump of Jesse. I’m sure she could have done that!

Isaiah’s text is generative. As much as we are able, we ought to do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with God- but guess what? This vision of holy leadership and of peaceable kingdom- even if it’s somewhat hyperbolic- is God’s vision. It is not a To-Do list but a word of reassurance. This is how it’s going to be! New growth, new leadership, and peace with justice will ultimately come to be, because that is God’s vision.

Think for a moment of how complicated the Advent/ Christmas season can be. Uplifting, and joy-filled and fraught- all at the same time. Some are looking forward with eager anticipation. Some are grieving loss. For some, a mix of both? All conspires to say these are

the holidays- aren't they great? Yes, and sometimes no. A shoot will emerge from the stump of Jesse. When it looked like there would be no way... a tender stem pushed through the concrete.

How do we be there for one another in authentic ways? Not denying loss, but offering solidarity, friendship, community, and hope? The church at its best is real and embracing of the people in it- even while we aspire to be our best selves and to build a world that holds a glimpse of that reign of God. Do you remember the song, we are a gentle angry people- and we are singing for our lives? We are gentle with neighbor and stranger, yet angry at injustice. Gentle with the land and environment- but angry when things do hurt or destroy on God's holy mountain.

(On Friday, I met a man named Justin whose mother died earlier this year, and recently, he lost his job. He's only 40. His earnest striving for himself and his kids was very clear. He came for food- and I said, do you need things for the holidays? All he asked for himself was food, because that would help his kids too. He has a 13 -year- old son and a 9-year-old daughter. He moved from Hudson to Troy recently. He's sort of from here! When I asked, "What does your 13-year-old son need?" He responded, "Disciple." Who among us who has ever had a 13-year-old can't relate to that wonderful response? Don't worry- the kid is going to receive clothing and basketball games too.

We need these moments of connection – sometimes with people very different from ourselves and yet very much the same in our shared humanity.

The Coming One will be known by the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might (or valor), the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord? Do you know what that reminds us of? Confirmation.

Placing a hand on the head of confirmands invoking for them the spirit of wisdom and understanding...

All that is godly in this leader envisioned by Isaiah is also what we hope for in raising up new leaders. A little child shall lead them.

Even while we prepare for the birth of the Christ, we proclaim that Christ is born in people- in this faith community, when young people as well as elders embody those qualities of love and justice and wholeness.

Do all the good you can do, and when necessary, rest in the vision that the day is surely coming... They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain. And on the days when you most need it, may this be your experience-

Shoulders- Naomi Shihab Nye

A man crosses the street in rain,
stepping gently, looking two times north and south,
because his son is asleep on his shoulder.

No car must splash him.
No car drive too near to his shadow.

This man carries the world's most sensitive cargo
but he's not marked.
Nowhere does his jacket say FRAGILE,
HANDLE WITH CARE.

His ear fills up with breathing.
He hears the hum of a boy's dream
deep inside him.

We're not going to be able
to live in this world
if we're not willing to do what he's doing
with one another.

The road will only be wide.
The rain will never stop falling.

A new day of peace and justice is coming. I don't know when. Neither do you, but we're
going to keep living into that vision. Amen.