

The Jesse Tree

This sermon started 22 years ago by my saying to Cheryl, "After the kids are out of the house, I don't want to have a Christmas tree anymore." She pointed out that the kids and grandkids would miss it. Remember, at this point our oldest was 12. Like we'd have lots of grandkids to think about. I offered the idea of a manger instead; you can't miss the real Christmas in that. "Besides," I countered, "a Christmas tree is the symbol of the world's Christmas." "Why not have a Jesse tree?" she asked. Her brother, an ELCA pastor, didn't have a Christmas tree, but a Jesse tree. I hate to admit it but that's a great idea.

In carols we sing about the "Rod of Jesse," and the Branch "springing from Jesse's race." Jesse is the father of King David from whom Christ descended. But really if you want to have a Jesse tree it ought to be a stump like our text says. Imagine a Christmas tree stripped of ornaments and lights, branches hacked off, and cut down leaving only 3 inches of stump. That would be a Jesse tree because this is what Isaiah 6 shows us. "And though a tenth remains in the land, it will again be laid waste. But as the terebinth and oak leave stumps when they are cut down, so the holy Seed will be a stump in the land" (Is. 6:13). The Jesse Tree it isn't a tree at all. It's cut-off tree with barely anything sticking out of the ground. You've seen these stumps in the woods. You put your foot on them to tie your shoe and they crumble.

Such a stump is an accurate symbol of the world's Christmas and the OT's too. Yes, the world has a dead stump in its Christmas. Jimmy Stewart is shown what happens if he was never born. His house is nothing but a vacant, rundown, crumbling structure. Scrooge is dragged to the graveyard, and sees that his sinful hardheartedness has killed Tiny Tim. Yes, there is a point in the world's Christmas where Frosty melts, the Grinch steals, and the Miracle on 34th Street doesn't happen. And a rotting stump is certainly a symbol of the OT church's Christmas. In the OT, the Assyrians and the Babylonians devastated the people of God leaving a mere 50,000; their glorious Temple burned and leveled. Then 30 years before the birth of Christ, Herod had captured Jerusalem killing 200,000 Jews. At the birth of Christ, Rome turned the country upside down herding them all back to their hometowns to tax them.

We too deserve a Christmas stump. Our sins have wreaked havoc in our life. The reason so many tears fall around Christmas trees is *not* because Christ is born but because we're born sinners. The reason our government is in such turmoil isn't because Christ is not in Washington but because sinners are. The reason war, hunger, and disease loom is not because heaven has failed but because our sins stink to high heaven. A stump would be fitting. It symbolizes that we have no hope because of our sins. It shows what sinners have to look forward to. Let us politic our best, we'll still have scoundrels in office. Let us war our best, we'll never defeat tyranny. Let us research our best, we'll not do away with disease. Like the carol sings, the Jesse tree is a stump and it's always found "In midst of coldest winter/ At deepest midnight hour."

Yet the Jesse tree produces; the stump sends forth a shoot. If I had the courage, you would've come here this morning to a stump where once a beautiful Christmas tree had stood. But none of you would've been able to see the real point. Only the Elder, acolyte, and I could've seen from that 3 inch stump a tiny green sprout. The Jesse tree is a dead stump with just a tiny green shoot coming out of it. But don't make that shoot a branch. When Isaiah speaks of it, he always uses diminutive words. He calls it a "twig", and not a shoot but actually a "sucker". A sucker is a shoot from the underground stem of a plant. The part above ground is chopped off, dead, rotting; this twig sprouts from the part still buried. Even the word "branch" doesn't connote something thick and hearty. It comes from a Hebrew word meaning greenness. It emphasizes how green and tender the new shoot is.

This element: the tiny shoot, the green twig, the sucker is not part of the world's Christmas. In the world's Christmas you go from the rotting stump to the whole enchilada. You get the whole tree mighty, majestic, and decked out instantaneously. In one night Jimmy Stewart goes from suicide to success and Scrooge changes from abuser to savior of Tiny Tim. In one day Frosty reconstitutes, the Grinch gives Christmas back, and there is a miracle on 34th street. There's no faith in the world's Christmas. Faith dies at the sight of the stump becoming a tree in minutes. Faith gives way instantly to sight as Jimmy celebrates with family, Scrooge dines with the Cratchits, and the Grinch parties with Whoville.

What happy endings! No wonder they're holiday favorites. But how depressing and even deadly they are to true faith because they depict what those in Israel wanted from Jesus: an instant turnaround. The Romans defeated, themselves in power, and the Way of God to be shown, proven to be the one and only right way. When that didn't happen, what did? They crucified Jesus whom they considered a fake King of the Jews. They crucified the One who wouldn't come down from the cross and save Himself. They crucified the One who would not turn the stump of Jesse into their Christmas tree instantly.

A stump with a tiny, green twig shooting out of it is a lousy symbol for the world's Christmas but a great one for ours. Yes, see nothing here but a sawn off stump and one green shoot. See your Christmas presents piled around it. See your family gathered around it. For this sprouted stump depicts what really happened on the first Christmas. The stump of Jesse after over 800 years of dying and rotting suddenly sent forth a green, living sprout. God hadn't forsaken His people; God hadn't forgotten His promises to them. But the Marys and Josephs, the Zechariahs and Elizabeths, the Shepherds and Magi, the Simeons and Annas didn't see that Baby spout grow to manhood overnight like some science-fiction alien would. No, they saw only the beginning. But in faith they saw that God was now on the scene to do as He had promised: crush the serpent's head, redeem the world from the curse, and deal with sins in His own body. They believed that the twig which had miraculously sprouted from the dead stump would one day become a mighty tree.

Jump ahead 33 years; what do we hear Jesus say to the weeping women of Jerusalem on the way to the cross? He admits He's the full grown Tree of Jesse saying, "If they do these things to a Green Tree, what will they do to a dry one?" The full grown Jesse tree lush, vibrant is going out to the Cross to be striped, chopped, and killed. Christians just can't get the cross out of their Christmas. It's there in the swaddling clothes which are burial cloths; it's there is the myrrh which is like our embalming fluid; it's there when Simeon tells Mary that a sword would pierce her own soul *too*. That means Jesus' soul will also be pierced. This cross has no place in the world's Christmas. It wouldn't do to have nails, spear pierce Jimmy through as we sing in "What Child is This." It wouldn't do to have Scrooge sorrowing, suffering, bleeding, dying and stuck in the stone cold tomb as we sing in "We 3 Kings." It wouldn't do to sing of the Grinch who gets his heart healed as we will sing of Jesus in The Thanksgiving "Thou must bear such bitter woes...yet findest none to soothe Thy heart."

But it's not a Christian Christmas without the cross. The cross in the end is what makes Christmas merry, happy, blessed. The dead stump of Jesse becomes a glorious Tree raising the dead, healing the sick, casting out demons. But then the Green Tree is marched out to Calvary, stripped of His branches, and made into a bare, cold, dead tree. However, it's from this Dead Tree that our life comes. You see this in the ancient paintings of Christ crucified where blood flows from His wounded side to fill the Cup of Communion or water to fill the Font of Baptism. Yes, it's only from a Dead Green Tree that our life comes just as it is only from a dead stump that our Salvation sprouted.

The medieval Christians showed this on their Christmas trees. In the late 1400s there was a play called "The Paradise Play." It portrayed Adam and Eve being thrown out of the Garden. An important prop in the play was a fir tree hung with apples. Soon trees of this sort appeared in Christian homes; they interpreted the tree as a symbol of the coming Savior. Luther is said to be among the first to do this. Over time the apples were replaced with other ornaments. But before the apples were replaced with pastry in the shape of stars, angels, hearts, flowers and bells, do you know what Christians decorated their Christmas trees with? Small white wafers representing Communion!

The Christmas tree represented to them the Tree of Life not because it was brightly decorated, not because it evoked family feelings, holiday memories, or because miracles happened round it like Jimmy being saved and the Grinch and Scrooge changed. No, medieval Christians knew the Christmas tree could be a Tree of Life only when the Body of Christ hung on it. And that only happened once its branches were stripped and it was sawn in two. They saw the stark, drab outline of a cross in their Christmas trees. Christmas Trees came to be decorated so brightly not because Christians expected instant miracles. They were decorated in the faith that since God had brought a sprout from the rotten dead stump of Jesse, He would go on to produce a

mighty, living, green tree out of it. But the story didn't end for them till the Tree became a dead cross and the dead cross became a lifegiving Tree once more.

Can you see why I wanted to do away with the tree? A beautifully decorated Christmas tree jumps into the story halfway. It skips over the dead stump shooting forth a green twig and it doesn't reach the dead tree of the Cross becoming lifegiving to sinners. Now even if we just called it a Jesse Tree, we might remember where it came from. And if we decorated it with small white wafers, we'd see where it is going to. Amen

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The Feast of the Nativity (20201225); Isaiah 10:33-34; 11:1,10

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