

Isaiah 11:1-6

“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of power, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth; with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked. Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them.”

On one particular trip to the mountains, as Patricia and I drove along we quickly began to notice how many of the trees had already lost many, if not all of their foliage. The higher we went the barker the terrain became, and the colder it became. This winter dead-zone we were seeing was the result of the natural life cycle trees go through. In spring and summer it was green and lush. In fall and winter it was brown and bare. Wouldn't it be nice if life was that neat and tidy?

What makes a wild, unmanaged forest so vital - even when the forest floor looks like a big mess much like the floor of a teenager's room? Scattered among the messy forest floor, among the decaying evergreen forests are especially nurturing sites known as nurse logs. Nurse logs are simply great big chunks of dead, decaying tree trunks. Except they are only dead at the outer level. See, the initial tree which died and fell to the ground, in reality is not really dead but instead is thriving; it's thriving because it's really busy giving life to a whole new generation for the forest.

The decaying surface of the dead tree creates a perfect growing place for a tiny seed, a struggling seedling, even a young sun-seeking sapling. The decaying tree becomes nursemaid, a nurse-tree, to the upcoming new tree.

I read a story the other day about an old tree, which was broken off about three to four feet up. The stump which remained was still quite broad in diameter. Springing out of these ragged remains was a beautiful little fir tree. The baby tree is itself now seven to eight feet tall, perfectly proportioned, sprouting tall and straight directly out of the old snagged stump that provides it with a booster seat for nutrients, allowing sunlight in for the little tree.

Every Christmas someone takes the time to decorate this beautiful symbol of new-life-out-of-old. Pretty ribbons and golden bells adorn the tender, delicate green branches of the new tree that grows and flourishes on the stability, strength, and sustenance the old, broken tree provides for it. That's the same image, the same care that this week's Isaiah text describes with such power. Notice how the prophet describes the coming of the great new messianic king, the ruler who will redeem and reclaim Israel to a favored place among all nations.

Isaiah doesn't describe a giant, or a sudden storm of divinely-charged power. Instead the prophet's image starts small. The long awaited Messiah arrives as a small shoot, a tiny, tender, green sprout.

This shoot doesn't spring up out of a carefully prepared, plowed and furrowed field. Its source for germination is the decaying stump of an old, once powerful name ... Jesse. Jesse, the father of David, was the father of the entire line of David's monarchy. Jesse gave life to a king, who in turn gave life to the greatest age of power and influence in Israel's history.

Even though Isaiah's message to Israel in the first ten chapters has declared the nation's decay and the people's spiritual bankruptcy, the history of Israel's relationship with God isn't dismissed or discarded. The past generations, all those who had lived and died, made up a rich, fertile layer of spiritual soil, a deep, a complex medium capable of sustaining the new generations yet to come. Even in Israel's most brokenness, there is a vital spirit that can nurture a new divine presence within their midst.

The Messiah is described first as a single shoot, but there is a deeper source to this new ruler's life. It's not just the stump of Jesse that gives new vitality. It's the roots themselves; it's that which nurtured and brought life to

Jesse himself. The Messiah springs both from Jesse and from the divine presence that existed before Jesse, before Israel. The Messiah's roots are in God, in the divine mystery itself. It's these roots of divinity which enable the spirit of the Lord to flow through this tender shoot, a spirit which brings wisdom and understanding counsel and might, the knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Roots, stumps, small green shoots, tender new branches, none of these images are big, flashy, or impressive in any worldly way. They are instead small, simple signs of life and hope and the divine presence in the midst of the people.

In one of the latest, new editions of Webster's Dictionary, our pop-culture has been adding new words to the ever increasing listing of words: the word or words I mention is bling-bling. Bling-bling, for those of you who don't have teenagers or aren't into pop-culture, refers to big, gaudy, bright costume jewelry with which one decorates oneself and one's life. Huge chunky gold jewelry, over-sized and obviously fake gems, sequins, lame, rhinestone covered, over-the-top glitz of all kinds, qualify as bling-bling. Bling-bling exists for one reason and one reason only: to be noticed.

There is verbal bling-bling as well as physical bling-bling. The trend in everyday conversation is to use large big sounding words. At Starbucks, the smallest coffee you can order is a Tall; a Grande, which is both Italian and Spanish for large. My father was an average-sized man. He really never gained a lot of weight, or height, for most of my life. But in the same amount of time, his T-shirt size went from small/medium to medium/ large to large/extra-large.

Despite cultural appearances to the contrary, this season is NOT about bling-bling, but that doesn't seem to be the case after a walk around shopping malls and Main Streets which are now all garlanded, glistening, and gaudy. But in the season of Advent we're not preparing for the arrival of a giant dazzling spectacle. We're preparing for the arrival of a small, seemingly insignificant shoot. Advent prepares us not to blinding bling-bling but to twinkle, twinkle little star. Advent is about roots, it's about shoots, not frills and extravagance.

As with so many divinely-sent messages, Advent gets twisted and mangled by human nature, making our attention to the small, the fragile and the faltering even less at this time of year. Instead of celebrating the twinkle in the eye of God, we're blinded by the glare of all the glitz and glamour.

Instead of this being the season when "*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*" as in verse 6, it becomes the season when the wolf comes out in all of us. Don't think so? Check out the parking lot of your closest shopping center and/or mall. Listen to the horns honking obscenities at each other. Witness the NASCAR antics as drivers desperately race for the next available parking space. Try dodging the shopping cart, or racing toward a sale display.

Advent season is the time of the year to not only prepare, but to add Christmas to your life. To add Christmas to your life means to pay attention to that small voice, the small growth, the small crack, the small table, the small talk, the small town like Bethlehem, the small change, the small children . . . "*and a little child shall lead them.*" To add Christmas to your life means to live in the light of Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who, where one

small voice rallies an entire village. To add Christmas to your life means to recognize the importance of unimportance. To add Christmas to your life means to start small, to pay attention to those things that are smaller than life, to sweat the small stuff. To add Christmas to your life means to honor the fact that big things don't become big, only small things become big. To add Christmas to your life means hearing God say to each one of us: *"You dreamed to do great things. You did small things faithfully and well. Well done, good and faithful servant."*

Quaker philosopher Rufus Jones once told a true story about a man who owned a summer cottage on the coast of Maine who was determined to start a Sunday School class for children who lived on a nearby offshore island. He sailed to the island in his boat, gathered the children together, and began to instruct them in matters of faith. Hardly knowing where to begin, he decided to start with something familiar to all the youngsters. The Atlantic Ocean surrounded their island. They saw it every day. He would begin with the Atlantic. He asked them, "How many of you have ever seen the Atlantic Ocean?"

There wasn't a single response. All the children stared at him blankly. Thinking they had not understood him, he repeated the question: "How many of you have seen the Atlantic Ocean?" No one spoke a word or raised a hand. To his astonishment, the Sunday School teacher realized, although the children had spent all their lives with the sound of Atlantic surf beating in their ears and with the vast stretches of the Atlantic spread before their eyes, they did not know what he was talking about.ⁱ

We hear about the Kingdom of God and many are waiting and expecting some great and astounding something to happen. As when a child is baptized. A child's baptism should be a reminder to us during this Advent season that the little ones, these little shoots if you will, are the ones we need to focus on. It's not about the adults who think they are in charge who set forth what everyone else will do, but as Scripture tells us "*and a child shall lead them.*" This Advent we all need to get ready, to prepare ourselves by focusing on the little things, listening for His still small voice. We need to understand it's not about the big bright and grand things of this world, but the little shoots; it's about the small growth. Remember, "*and a child shall lead them.*" Are you the stump they can grow from?

ⁱ Harold E. Kohn, ADVENTURES IN INSIGHT (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans publishing Company, 1967).