

Pr. Ben Adams
First Sunday of Advent, Year C
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A Shoot from the Stump

I don't have any tattoos, but if I did, I would want to get something with a lot of symbolic meaning. Not someone's name or picture, not some saying or scripture, or just a decorative pattern. I'd want a symbol with some mystery. And one of the symbols in my life that has given me lots of hope and meaning is the image of a lifeless tree stump with a new shoot growing from it. I originally saw this image while I was in seminary and I learned about Seminex, or Seminary in Exile. And Seminex began in 1974 when ten faculty members from Concordia Lutheran Seminary in St. Louis walked out in protest to a years-long investigation that had been conducted by the president of the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod to root out any professors that were not teaching scripture as a literal and inerrant document.

For these brave professors that walked out and seminarians that followed them, our very own Mark Bangert being one of them, the symbol of a new shoot growing from the stump of a tree that they had once loved, nurtured, and dedicated so much to was the hope that they carried into the unknown, into exile.

And this symbol of hope and resistance comes from the Hebrew bible, where in Isaiah it is prophesied, "There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit." Jesse is the father of King David who we explored so much of this past summer, and through devastation and exile of the Israelites, the Davidic line of kings has been reduced to only a stump. But out of this stump comes a new shoot, a branch that will once again bear fruit.

That is the kind of symbol that I, if I ever did get enough courage, would get tattooed on me. But what does this have to do with our scripture readings today? Well, in both our first reading from Jeremiah and our Gospel we have a mention of trees.

In Jeremiah, it says, "The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land."

And in our Gospel Jesus offers us a parable as we begin our season of Advent, "'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near."

Trees make it so that we can breathe, they bear fruit, and their leaves signal changes on the horizon whether it be the changing seasons or an oncoming storm. And since the dawn of our species, trees have been our silent companions, and maybe that's why trees are among our lushest metaphors and strongest symbols and because the richness of what they say is more than metaphorical — they speak a sophisticated silent language.

Even when a tree has been reduced to a stump, there is an unseen system of roots that continues to give life and eventually give way to new shoots that come forth from the stump. Now when I lived in the Pacific Northwest I remember the sight of forests being reduced to a sea of stumps as a result of logging. The scene looked apocalyptic, and it was hard to imagine that any life could come back to such a devastated looking landscape.

We too might have a hard time seeing past the apocalyptic images Jesus speaks of in today's Gospel to see the life giving branch that shoots out of this stump of a Gospel reminding us that even in the most apocalyptic of scenes, or the moments where it seems death has had the last word, when we look closer we find that shoot, sprouting forth as a testament to the power of life over death.

It is in this first week of Advent that we remember the branch that grew from the stumpiest of places in the stumpiest of circumstances in a place that no one would have regarded as being good for anything but sitting on. That stump made low is where Christ has come and will come again to give life to our severed world.

And from that shoot, fruit is born, and we, you and I, are the fruit of that branch, having been grafted to the tree of life, the cross, in our baptism. It is our baptismal lives and discipleship being fed by the roots of the stump up through the branch that we are a part of that are a living fruit for the world.

If you are feeling cut down, made low, or reduced to just a stump, know that one we wait for this advent sprouted as a sapling from a stump of a place like Bethlehem in a stump of a place like in a manger to an unwed, teenage mother and it was in that place that the savior of our world took root to resurrect our stump-ridden world and to give life to everyone who has been chopped by the death-dealing, ax-wielding forces of this world, God finds their home in you and we wait now for that shoot to spring forth once again.

We are in a season where trees are all around us, being cut down on tree farms, being sold on tree lots, all to decorate our homes this season. We too here at Holy Trinity decorate our space with a tree. You may have seen it on your way into our space. It is our giving tree and we invite you to take a tag from that tree and share the love and life that you have experienced through Christ with someone who might be in a stump-like place this holiday. Each tag will provide one of our South Loop Neighbors in need with a \$25 Target gift card. In this small but meaningful act of charity, we pray that the words of 1st Thessalonians be made real in our lives and in the life our neighbors, that the Lord make us increase and abound in love for one another and for all.

This is the fruit of the shoot springing forth from a stump once left for dead. You are the fruit of the shoot. Even in a stump-filled world, that may seem like the end of the world as we know it, God brings from that stump a beginning to the world as it should be. We wait with hopeful anticipation and action for the springing of that shoot in our lives and in the life of the world. Amen.