

Grace Episcopal Church
December 8, 2013
Sermon by Rev. Dr. Gloria Hopewell
Texts — Isaiah 11:1-10, Matthew 3: 1-12

What compelling images there are in our readings today! Some quite beautiful, some more on the terrifying side. There is the wilderness and the paths being made straight. There is the picture of an old-time, wild looking prophet in John the Baptist, harshly calling the religious leaders to repentance. And then, of course, there is that peaceable kingdom—wolves and lambs, leopards and kids, cows, bears, and lions, all peacefully co-existing and being led by a little child. A child who can put a hand into an adder's nest without fear of harm.

But strangely, what has captured me this past week or two is the image of the stump in the Isaiah reading: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Stump. Even the word is unattractive. It brings to mind loss. The flowering tree that tipped over of its own weight pulling up the roots. The stately, ancient oak toppled by storm and wind, or lightning. A limb lost to disease, accident, or act of war.

I may have told you about the tree in the parkway of my condo in Chicago--the one my across-the-hall neighbors had radically trimmed in order to make their condo more marketable by opening up their third floor view of the lake. In a matter of hours the old, awkward catalpa tree was transformed, the top fourth or so lopped off. Instead of gnarly dead branches that threatened to fall on the cars below, we were left with a tall, straight trunk with about eight fat limbs each ending in a flat stump. It was a weird sight—uglier even than the twisted old branches. But the lake view was much improved.

It got worse. After a few months, each stump sprouted straight little sticks—twigs that looked like they had been glued on. When the next spring rolled around, there were tiny tufts of green on their ends. Sort of like a giant Chia Pet. Several times, the condo board thought about just having the tree chopped down and replaced with a sapling. But we didn't get around to it.

By this summer, though, the little sticks had become 12-15 foot tall branches, and when the leaves reached their fullness, the old catalpa looked quite handsome and healthy. It's nearly impossible to see those eight stumps now. And we no longer talk of chopping it down.

On this day when we talk of stumps and roots, axes and winnowing forks, most of our world is thinking of tree-trimming in a very different way. The landscapes of our neighborhood and towns have blossomed wreaths and Christmas trees and the glow of tiny lights. There are tree-lighting ceremonies, concerts of seasonal music, parties and celebrations. Everything around us is already INTO Christmas. But here inside these walls, we resist and enter into a rich time of waiting and anticipation. Our readings do not match the mood of our Christmas world—there are no stars or stables, no shepherds or angels. They are, however, fundamental to our faith story—the preface to the core of the Incarnation—the prelude to Jesus' own baptism and the revealing of God in human form through his life and ministry.

Each year, on the second Sunday of Advent, we hear a lesson from a First Testament prophet along with one gospel account of John the Baptist at the River Jordan. It was important to the gospel writers to make a strong connection to those earlier prophecies to present the coming of Jesus and his ministry as their fulfillment. The Gospel was not to be scripture for a new group of people who called themselves "Christians" but a new message for Jews rooted in and continuous with the scripture they already considered as sacred. The people who gathered there at the Jordan River and the people who comprised Matthew's community would have known the words of the prophet Isaiah. They also would have recognized John the Baptist as a real, old-time prophet, perfectly believable as one who would prepare the way of the Lord. After all, his outfit and his diet were just right the camel's hair robe or tunic, the leather belt, the eating of locusts and wild honey recalling Elijah, the greatest of prophets, some 800 years before. And the setting of the wilderness worked well with the message of making the paths straight.

Both Isaiah and John were addressing peoples in exile. For Isaiah's people, it was physical exile in Babylon. Defeat by the Assyrians was the consequence of their unfaithfulness to Yahweh, so the good news from Isaiah was a word of comfort. They had paid the price of their disobedience, God had forgiven them, and God would make the highway through the desert, would smooth out the rocky and thorny places, and would come to them.

The folks who were called into the wilderness more than 400 years later by John the Baptist were not physically exiled. But they lived under Roman rule and oppression. The Second Temple was flourishing a huge institution that had become so caught up in its own importance that it had strayed from the path of faithfulness its own kind of exile, both for the temple elite and those on the margins. John called them all to repentance.

The Greek word for repentance in this passage is "metanoia." This word signifies more than simple remorse for, say, failing to pray or come to church regularly, or for cutting someone off in traffic because you had to make it to an important appointment. It is transformation a turning around turning away from the old ways and turning toward God, seeing God and God's work with new eyes. This, too, is a word of comfort having the chance to start again, clean and new, pre-paring oneself for the new world that would arrive with the chosen one of God. It is the path made straight in the wilderness, the new growth emerging from a stump.

For both groups of people, though, the words of comfort also contained fear and anxiety. Not all of the exiles were uncomfortable. Many in Isaiah's time had assimilated to life in Babylon and chose to stay rather than go back through the desert to the unknown of their former homes. Some of those who went to the river to hear John the Baptist were also assimilated into the Temple culture, the practice of the letter of the law, if not its spirit. No need to change.

It is not so different for us. We, too, have assimilated to our culture. We, too, may recoil from the wilderness that exists right here and now. For some for refugees from war, oppression, violence, natural disasters and other horrors that we see in the news each day this wilderness is indeed a physical exile. And it is not just in Syria, Sudan, and Israel/Palestine or in developing countries. It is right here in Galena where the wilderness is exile from the mainstream of society being subjected to injustices that become apparent in the lack of decent housing,

healthcare, and a living wage. It is apparent at the Food Pantry which had a record month in November, in part because of cuts in the food stamp program. It is less apparent, but very present, in the people we rarely see because they are rushing off to second--or even third--jobs to make ends meet.

There are some of us in this place today whose wilderness is a spiritual or psychological exile. The exile of grief for the loss of loved ones bringing the need to patch together holiday celebrations that will have empty chairs for the first time. Troubled or lost relationships, lack of meaningful work, critical illness, a despair of the soul that fills us with sadness and emptiness when it seems that everyone else is enjoying the glitter and joy of the season. What is the word of comfort that is needed in our world? And who is to speak it?

The richness of the Advent season, a time for preparation, might just offer us a way to hear that word— a path in the wilderness. The Advent tradition that evolved in the early years of Christianity had a two-fold thrust: the preparation for celebrating the birth of Jesus Christ and the preparation for the end of time— or the coming of God's realm— when Jesus would return. Remembrance and anticipation. Looking back to the miracle of God's coming in the human form of Jesus and looking forward to the time that God's realm would be fulfilled.

These are not just single moments in time. It is a continuous thread of time. We dare not just look back at a past event or passively wait for that which is to come. In this in-between time, we live into that future, carrying the gift of the past and being actively engaged in the becoming and the hope of the future. We are a part of bringing about that future— that realm described so beautifully by Isaiah, that "peaceable kingdom." That shoot from the stump of Jesse.

We don't tend to hear much about prophets now— ones like Isaiah, Elijah, John the Baptist. But there are some who come close. Some who have changed the world by speaking the truth to power without regard to their own safety and well being. Nelson Mandela, who died this past week, was one of those. This man, once called a terrorist by a former U.S. President, whose release from 27 years in prison was resisted by some U.S. leaders, lived long enough to be revered in his lifetime. Enough so, that his ardent followers fear that his memory will be made into what columnist Bob Herbert called a "sentimental stick figure" rather than the "firebrand, liberator, truth-teller" he was.

In the words of another commentator, (The Rev. J.C. Austin
Director of Christian Leadership Formation, Auburn Theological Seminary):

The true greatness of Mandela, the most profound miracle he performed, was that he made his supporters, his enemies, and his admirers around the world believe that the world could change and be redeemed; he made all of us believe that "the way things are" is not the way things have to be. He made us believe we could be a part of making that change happen, in becoming miracle-workers ourselves. He showed us amazing ways of doing that, and he made us want to join him.

Sounds prophet-like to me. Sounds like metanoia. Transformation. A change from the world as it is to the world that could be. The world God intended, that Isaiah foretold, that John the Baptist heralded, that Jesus showed us.

Maybe *we* are meant to be the prophets, too, calling for transformation, giving voice to God's Good News. Maybe *we* must be willing to move out of our present-oriented comfort and go into the wilderness.

You see, the wilderness is not just a scary place of wild beasts and bandits and confused wandering. It is also a place of preparation, of hope and change, a place away from our everyday routine and all of the assumptions and habits that go with that. Even a place of beauty if we are able to adjust our eyes. God has promised us a highway through the wilderness where the rough places, the rocks and thorns, have been smoothed. And God comes to us on that highway, whether those rocks and thorns have been leveled out of a desert road or smoothed in the very depths of our own hearts.

You see, stumps always try to sprout. There is always the possibility of new and abundant growth so long as the root system has not been destroyed. It may take a long while— the several years required for my catalpa tree or the centuries for the branch from Jesse's root. In this Advent season, may our hearts sprout with joy as God's promises are born anew. May we become the voices of the prophets who cry in the wilderness, "Prepare the way of the Lord."
Amen and amen.