

“Those Pesky Roots”

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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Mary Taylor Memorial United Methodist Church, Milford, Connecticut

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Let me start with a confession. Few of us are yet so jaded that a public confession by the preacher doesn't get our attention, although those seeking something sensational will be disappointed.

My confession is that the metaphor of this sermon, “Those Pesky Roots,” is a bit of a stretch for me even though I chose the title. Better that my wife Carol, who has gardening talent and whose spring project will be the reclamation of the terraced gardens behind our house; or the Macri's, whose farm and produce provides hospitality and mission dollars for our ministry, should develop these thoughts. Nonetheless, you have me. Oh, well.

Still, the message and metaphor is simple. Roots don't give up. They keep trying to put out more of whatever they are roots for. Pacasandra, crabgrass, oaks, poison ivy: good and bad, roots are pesky. It seems you cannot defeat them short of a scorched-earth policy. And not always even then.

The message is simple: God doesn't give up. On you. On me. On our world, violent and sin-sick as it is. If you are a reader of the Upper Room Disciplines as some 40 of you are (and Don Hastings still has a few extra copies for your 2014 devotions if you'd like to join us), you read this on Thursday from the Rev. Charles Allen: *“Advent is a time to renew outrageous hopes.”* (1)

Isaiah the prophet would have been forgiven for thinking otherwise. His country lay in ruins at the abysmal end of a war with the Assyrians. What King David had built and King Solomon had made prosperous, the northern kingdom of Israel, had fallen in a devastating war of 722/721 B.C. Of all people, Isaiah should have known better. He was an “insider,” a court prophet, a Billy Graham or Rick Warren. But now, all lay in ruins.

(1) Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions, 2013, Nashville, Upper Room Books, p. 400

One struggles to hear this scripture without thinking of the recent war in Iraq and the current war in Afghanistan, not only with the loss of civilian and military life and social order. The effects continue with the residue of chaos in family life there and here, as wounded veterans return home, and the long-forgotten reporting of the destruction of great historical and archeological riches. (2)

Yet Isaiah says “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*” (3) Those pesky roots! Jesse, of course, was King David’s father, widely regarded as Israel’s greatest king. His lineage was looked to for the restoration of Israel’s fortunes. In a few moments we will sing the carol that is based on this yearning for the restoration of the nation after the devastating defeat by Assyria:

*“Lo, how a Rose e’er blooming from tender stem hath sprung!
Of Jesse’s lineage coming, as those of old have sung.”* (4)

Is this just wishful thinking? Well, yes and no. There is always some wishful thinking about being a Christian, if by that we mean that we continue to hope that we might fulfill the potential God sees in us. There is always wishful thinking in seeking the rainbow in the rain and the good in despair. If you have experienced great pain, physical or emotional, surgery or betrayal, you have also come to know how deeply you are loved by others, and often not until these crises happen.

Wolves living with lambs, leopards and kids and lions and calves all dwelling together, children putting their hand on a snake’s den: wishful thinking, perhaps; but also powerful, counter-intuitive images of what life in God’s community can be like.

Growing up in a home of four boys, we’d get rambunctious at times. When it became too wild my mom would say we behaved like animals. Oh, how I wish it were so, that we would

(2) National Geographic, November, 2004.

(3) Isaiah 11:1

(4) “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming,” The United Methodist Hymnal, #216

behave like animals. Animals do not kill their own, nor engage in pillage, torture, rape, war and wanton destruction, which seem to be the sole domain of humans. So, yes, Isaiah's prophecy has a bit of wishful thinking. On a lighter note, one wonders about the particulars of Isaiah's "peaceable kingdom." Perhaps they are like the experience of the zookeeper who noticed an orangutan reading both the Bible and Darwin's *Origin of the Species*. He asked the ape "What gives?" The orangutan replied "Well, I'm trying to figure out if I'm supposed to be my brother's keeper or my keeper's brother."

Yet Isaiah's prophecy is not wishful thinking. It is as hard-nosed as those pesky roots which, almost no matter what we do, appear and reappear. As much as is terrible in life around us, there is a generous and life-giving impulse in God; and that godly impulse lives and thrives in us. If it were not so, we would be numb or indifferent to the horror, as psychopaths are. Our outrage at our inhumanity to one another says that we understand what things should look like, even if they don't. We also have within us those pesky roots of hope, love, compassion, sacrifice and service.

How important is it to remember that? As important as life and death. I laughed this week at a novelty Christmas catalog with a doormat that had a saying repeated twice. The saying was "Let's Eat Grandma:" the first without a comma, "Let's Eat Grandma" and the second with a comma, "Let's Eat, Grandma." And underneath was the inscription, "Commas save lives." (5)

These pesky roots save lives. When we lose touch with our spiritual and godly roots, death is sure to follow. One of the aftereffects of last year's superstorm Sandy was the number of fallen trees. One that fell in my yard barely missed the house, and it was clear that the roots had died. There was very little support for these top-heavy titans and the wind brought them down on their own weight. Another, which looked fine before it fell, was rotten to the core.

(5) "What on Earth" catalog, Holiday, 2013, p. 23

Someone might fairly object, “*But pastor, what if my roots aren’t healthy? Isn’t it good to lose touch with unhealthy roots?*” Perhaps. Certainly we need to grow new roots and draw on those who can help us do so. A friend of mine, using humor to grow beyond some of the painful dysfunction of his family of origin, quips, “We put the ‘fun’ in ‘dysfunctional.’” Almost weekly we hear of some celebrity in entertainment or art or politics or business whose life has risen above the adversity of origin. Yet in hearing these stories and thinking of them as bigger than life, we miss the arguably less newsworthy but certainly no less inspiring reclamations that occur among us. Just this week several of our people, two in private conversation with me and others in groups, shared how they have grown beyond some of their unhealthy roots by the power of Jesus Christ and through living and serving God through the Church, Christ’s body on earth. These are our friends and neighbors, empowered by God to rise above adversity by both accepting what is while determined to become what God intends.

And let’s not let small stuff cloud our vision. You know how fog can cloud our vision. It was very foggy Thursday as I wrote this message, with warm air following colder days and ground temperatures. Do you know how much water it takes to make fog covering a city block? One tablespoon. ⁽⁶⁾ Distributed into billions of tiny droplets. Too many of us let a tablespoon full of problems become a fog that obscures sunlit blessings.

As we move deeper into Advent, one thing is for sure: God doesn’t give up. God comes among us in Jesus Christ, to bring the message of our redemption. When we resist God and destroy the gifts he has given us, whether in us or in others, God is not stopped. Like those pesky roots, God keeps on sprouting the love and hope and new possibilities that God wants us to have. God keeps envisioning a new reality, where lion and lamb live together. And the lion and lamb in and among us, too. Let us be strengthened by this hope. And let’s keep sprouting. Amen.

(6) www.wiki.answers.com