

Aim First, Stump Later – Advent 2A

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots,” prophesies the Great Isaiah, “the spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.” At first glance, we remember the offshoot of Jesse was his son, David, the greatest of all the kings of the Israelites.

Trouble is, Isaiah lived hundreds of years after David lived and died. So the prophet must have been commenting on history, as well as predicting the future. The history Isaiah takes on for a subject had already taken on legendary proportions, thus we are gifted with one of the most brilliantly instructive examples of the power of story to move and form us. He extracts future meaning from re-examined past. As with every good thing, that is, if we have ears to hear.

Stories begin when something happens, somebody talks about it afterwards with varying degrees of factual accuracy. Always, the teller of the story has a purpose for telling it. The most powerful stories that get told become religions. In religions, we who tell stories to one another do so because the central story has convinced us we must. Here in this place, we sing and pray and think and talk about the stories of Jesus because they make us feel like we must; they beg our retelling. This experience is what Paul calls “joy and peace in believing.”

The stories of religion, sacred texts, are said to have special power to move and form us. We are moved to take

certain actions, both in worship and daily life, and we consider ourselves to be in formation, 'works in progress' (aka, sinners) throughout our lives. If we have 'ears to hear,' which is to say, if we have a willing heart, we will always be growing spiritual beings. Our religion talks with us about the meaning of life, what we are, how we got here, where we're going, and what we're supposed to do in the meantime.

So we conclude that Isaiah's prediction included the news that the shoot in question, coming out of the stump of Jesse, and with all those magnificent qualities, had not yet come, was yet to come, was not David. In case we needed more convincing, the name 'Jesse' means 'King,' whereas 'David,' more or less: 'Beloved Uncle.'

Now that we think about it, it couldn't have been David, at least not early on. Once he beat out his seven brothers for the kingship, his legend became glorious and sacred, but, at first his actions were far from Isaiah's description of a righteous fellow. But it was about him, in the sense that he moved from his early character towards being a more just, righteous and godly ruler and man. And the story was also about the ruler longed for in Isaiah's day. Could it be that he was writing about all people everywhere: anybody who has power over another living being? Every one of us, our purpose is to lay aside the deeds of evil and put on the armor of good, whether we are signing a treaty, or looking for a parking space. We all must look for peace wherever we can find it, and treat each other the way we would like to be treated.

We believe it was Jesus who lived like this, and proved at once that such perfection exists, and that each of us will

attain it when we die trying. More than once this season we will reiterate our narrative and musical descriptions of a life we know of that was wholly dedicated to peace on earth, mercy and mildness, with goodness and all sinners reconciled; who had glory and to spare, but mildly lay it by. Because that birth proves we can have a second, spiritual birth and rise above our crueller natures and, in so doing, no more may die, ever.

“Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins,” declares the prophet. What marketing! OMG I want those now, and I will go online and order them the minute I can get to my phone. Seriously, who would not want a belt of righteousness around the waist and of faithfulness around the loins; what ad copy! What colors do they come in? I wear a slender. We sing for joy, and we light the rose candle, the candle that says, *Gaude!*, Rejoice! Such a life is possible. And we laugh out loud when we know that it is what we want.

Jesse was the grandson of Ruth and of Boaz. Remember Ruth immigrated from Moab to Judea with Naomi and stayed after their local husbands died. Because her actions in so doing went against accepted and expected practice, her story serves to illustrate that love and loyalty come to a people from unexpected and diverse sources. As in so much of Jesus’ teaching, it is the stranger, the marginalized, the woman who brings creativity, compassion and spiritual progress to the mix.

So Jesse was a product of this truth, the truth of Ruth, if you will. He was born in Bethlehem, into what had become a prosperous family of the Tribe of Judah, a farmer,

breeder and owner of sheep a prominent resident of the town of Bethlehem, he was important to us because he was no king, but produced them. Good rulers can come from anywhere. He was just a regular person.

As the story goes, the prophet Samuel asked Jesse to present his seven sons for possible kingship. When Samuel saw the eldest, Eliab, he was impressed by his stature and convinced he must be God's anointed king. But God said to Samuel, Nope. "Do not consider his appearance or his height; I have rejected him. The Lord does not look at the things man looks at. Man look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart." When Jesse presented his second son, Abinadab, God told Samuel, "The Lord has not chosen this one either." You see where this is going. All the sons were rejected. Finally, he told him that David the eighth and youngest didn't count; he was out tending the flocks. Too young to be considered. Outside the pale. Of course ole Sam the prophet asked for the young lad to be called in from over yonder, and the rest is history. Isaiah reiterates: the shoot will have spirit, knowledge and delight in the Lord, and like God, will not judge by what the eyes see, or the ears hear but deal righteousness to the poor, and equitable treatment to the meek of the earth.

At the very least we have an allegory for character development here: The ruler of one's heart must be the one chosen after all the ego, the tradition, the hierarchy, the inheritance, the power and stuff have been rejected, turned aside and removed. Then we will be left with the part of ourselves worth anointing and feeding all our days.

He goes on to spin an irresistible futuristic fable: "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. The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den." In other words, violence will disappear even from nature, where it's nobody's fault, That's the Kingdom.

At the very least, Isaiah is telling us that the only way to have a peaceful world is for humans to reprioritize themselves and serve the better angels of our nature. Only if we get better at being human, can there be less violence in the world, We are not merely meant to enjoy Creation, we are meant to care for it.

Remember T. H. White's *The Man who Would be King*, the magnificent retelling of ancient Britain's legend of Arthur and Merlyn and Lancelot and Guenivere and Sir Galahad, whom everyone disliked for being so good. Everyone's favorite part, *The Sword in the Stone*, chronicles Arthur's upbringing and initial training by Merlyn, the wizard who lives through time backwards. Already knowing the boy's destiny, Merlyn teaches Arthur to be a good king by turning him into various kinds of animals: fish, hawk, ant, goose, and badger, each one providing a lesson that an arrogant human being could not absorb.

Merlyn also instills in Arthur the belief that there is no justifiable reason for war and that so far in history, human governments and powerful people have only manifested the worst results of rule by the powerful, and Arthur must be different. Likewise, says Isaiah, the true ruler "will not hurt or destroy anyone or anything on all my holy

mountain; and then the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea. And on that day, the nations will once again inquire of him, and he will deserve a glorious dwelling.”

When we sing Psalm 72, the same desire is fervently expressed: “May the King treat your people with righteousness and your poor with justice. And then the mountains and hills will yield prosperity for the people. Let the King defend the poor, give deliverance to the needy, and crush any oppressor. Then – and only then -- may he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon. For then, and only then, he will be like rain that falls, like showers that water the earth, and in those days will righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more.

It goes on. The description of a good ruler is clear, as in Isaiah, and indeed no matter where we turn in Holy Scripture. God is not impressed with worldly power or riches or influence or pride. God desires humility, charity, self-examination and willingness to admit wrongs and make self-changes for the gentler from each of us, especially our leaders. Only by those for whom these are most deeply desired and eagerly pursued can the gift of life ever truly be paid. Only by those for whom these are most deeply desired and eagerly pursued can we ever be led and governed well.