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## *Advent Hope: Justice*

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

I don't know about you, but I am so ready for Christmas this year. With family in town over Thanksgiving and because I was so eager, we put up our Christmas tree a lot earlier than usual. After stringing the lights and hanging the ornaments and dangling the icicles, I stepped back and pronounced, as I do each year, "It's the best Christmas tree ever!"

Trees play an important role in this season. With their evergreen boughs they remind us – as they did ancient, pre-Christian peoples – that the long cold months ahead will eventually end in the new warm life of spring. Those who know their holiday history will remember that trees as we use them today in Christmas tradition were created in 18th century Germany as a way to signal the joy of light coming into the world. They came to America in the 19th century and have since spread around the world, to wherever Christians celebrate this season and await the birth of Jesus.

Did you notice in the texts this morning the two references to trees – Isaiah’s “stump of Jesse,” and John the Baptizer’s “trees that are to be cut down and thrown into the fire?” They are in the Bible readings every year during this season as we prepare for Christmas. We might call them the Trees of Advent. Long ago, our forebears in the faith spoke about trees to stir our imagination and prepare us for the coming of the Messiah. The trees of Advent offer hope, at least as Isaiah sees them in his poetic vision of good news. But those trees also temper that hope with a warning, as John makes clear in his foreboding words about what happens to a tree if it does not bear good fruit.

You may have noticed that both Isaiah and John also mention snakes in these two passages. Isaiah speaks of a little child playing unharmed by “the hole of an asp” and “an adder’s den,” while John calls out the “brood of vipers” who falsely worship God. The prophet and the Baptizer are playing out a good news-bad news routine in the way they approach Advent. The kindly prophet encourages the people of God to wait – for what will turn out to be seven centuries – while John’s impatient anger comes from knowing that they are about to come face to face with Jesus.

Isaiah takes the long view. He’s confident a Messiah will come one day as a descendant from the line of Jesse, the father of David. As we heard last week in the long list of 42 generations in the lineage of Jesus in Matthew’s

opening chapter, family trees matter. It's a way of telling us who the people of Jesus were, and who they might be.

The twists and turns of the branches of this particular family tree suggest that the long-awaited Messiah may not be what people expect. Isaiah seems to be in on the plot. He refers not to the tree of Jesse, as we might have expected, but to the stump. The tree has been cut down.

Why a stump? Had the family line become corrupt, or wandered too far from God, or broken covenant with God's people? Could John the Baptizer's warning that a tree not producing good fruit would be cut down and burned, be what happened to Jesse's family tree?

It's important to note that Isaiah's Advent vision begins at the stump, at the place when it appears that all hope is lost. Many of us have been there, or may be there now, at the end of a relationship or in a time of grief or facing serious illness, or with the world simply overwhelming us or closing in and leaving no way out. That's where Isaiah is – at the stump. It's a dead end.

Trees can fuel our imagination. At Ghost Ranch, the Presbyterian Conference Center located in the high desert of northern New Mexico, where we go each year, most of the trees are small scrub oak or piñon, but the cottonwoods grow large and tall. Several decades ago, one of the largest cottonwoods at the Ranch died and was cut

down. Many of us loved that tree. All that summer we walked by the stump with our children, sometimes sitting or standing on it, remembering the shade it had offered and recalling its beauty. We were saddened at the loss of a towering friend.

To everyone's surprise, when we returned the next summer, the tree had started to grow again. A few small sprouts were showing around the edges of the stump, and we wondered if there would be more. Next year the sprouts were small saplings, and then summer after summer we watched as that cottonwood come back to life. Its roots were still good. Today it's as tall and strong as it once was.

"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse," Isaiah says with confidence.

When life has been cut off, when the future seems to have slipped away, when the road ahead has all but disappeared, the prophet looks up from the stump and imagines a new tree starting to grow.

"And a branch shall grow out of his roots."

Isaiah's stump turns out to be an Advent tree. Who would have expected it? It surprises everyone as it springs from hidden roots. The prophet imagines new limbs growing as the trunk reaches to the sky. In his mind's eye I can

imagine him beginning to climb the tree. Higher and higher he goes, until he can look out and gaze at the world as God intended it to be, as a creation filled with peace. The Advent tree has helped him find hope.

The prophet describes what he sees, and it's a world teeming with righteousness. The Hebrew word here is tzedek, and it's hard to capture exactly in English. Tzedek conveys equity. Right relationships. Fairness in the social order. Cooperation. Absence of violence. Kindness among all peoples and toward the creation.

Justice may be the closest word in English.

“With righteousness,” the prophet says, “With tzedek he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”

The prophet's words here sound almost like a first draft of the Beatitudes Jesus would preach in his Sermon on the Mount 700 years later: Blessed are those who are poor, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are those who make peace, blessed are those who are meek, blessed are those who act with mercy, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness – for justice – for they will be filled.

This season can we join Isaiah in the branches of an imagined tree, and look out to see God's intention for

justice within the human community? Can we find Advent hope in a world awash in anxiety and fear? Can we share in the vision of an earth where predator and prey become friends – and not merely the lions and lambs, but people like you and me?

What will it take? Should we expect only others to do the hard work? John the Baptizer – standing in the wilderness, among all those trees, maybe even perched in their branches – also looks out to peer at the new day coming, and sees it's getting close. He calls out urgently to the people to prepare for that time, and to start with repentance, to turn away from that which keeps us in the shadows. Every one of us knows where that is in our lives, and in our communities.

Advent, whether seen through the eyes of Isaiah or John, invites us into the light of righteousness, of justice.

A few years ago, a repeat visitor to Westminster approached me after worship one day and said, “This church talks a lot about justice. Almost every week I hear about it. Why is that?”

I was grateful for the comment because it showed they were tuned into worship and education at Westminster, and listening well. It was a good question, the right question especially in Advent it is the right question. From the prophets of old to the Baptizer standing in the river,

the people of God waiting for the Messiah have always been waiting and working for justice, longing for the righteousness of God, yearning for right relationships and equity among all people.

For the ancient Hebrew seers, that meant advocating for widows, orphans, and resident foreigners, all of whom lived precariously in that time and with little power. In our time that might translate as advocating for just and equitable support for financially unstable seniors, children living in poverty, refugees, and others in vulnerable situations.

The people of God have always been concerned for those least able to live into the fullness of their God-given humanity because of the systems and structures and traditions in any given historical moment. To worship God is to praise the one who promises that change is coming, that justice will one day bring a broken world into balance – so, yes, we do focus on justice in church, because that is church.

Our desire for justice is not centered on other worldly concerns; it is about the here and now. That's why Isaiah pushes so hard, and why John joins him, for the reign of God's righteousness to break forth on earth. It's why the prophet goes to the stump of Jesse: to imagine an in-breaking of God's love and light even when gloom has settled, and no one expects things to change.

Seven centuries later, at the farthest branches of the family tree that makes its way up from that stump, Jesus picks up where Isaiah leaves off.

And 2000 years after that, here we are, among the trees of Advent, only we call them Christmas trees, and in their lights, if we look with the imagination of this season, we will see shining there the hope of justice that one day will come.

Maybe that's what makes them the best Christmas trees ever.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.