

**Worship Series: “Expecting Grace”**

“Sent to Praise”—Sermon Text: Isaiah 11:1-10

FUMC Arlington, Texas 76011

Second Sunday of Advent: 4 December 2016

**“My poems are hymns of praise to the glory of life”**

—(Edith Sitwell—1887—1964).

Hope is the slender thread upon which the world hangs. More than that, if one looks carefully of the world’s history, hope for the good conquering evil seems a slender thread at that. Yet, hope is what makes good people not only better; it also helps them hold fast to the good no matter what appearances suggest to the contrary. Hope is the engine that drives any life worth living. Of all the things that God gives us in Jesus Christ, God gives us hope in Christ. This story illustrates how hope changes the human perspective from despair about life to confidence in life, at least the way God gives it to us.

A school system in a large city had a program to help children keep up with their school work during stays in the city’s hospitals. One day the school system assigned one of its teachers to visit a particular child in the hospital. She took the child’s name and room number and talked briefly with the child’s regular class teacher. “We’re studying nouns and adverbs in his class now,” the regular teacher said, “and I’d be grateful if you could help him understand them so he doesn’t fall too far behind.”

The hospital program teacher went to see the boy that afternoon. No one had mentioned to her that her badly burned student was in great pain. Upset at the sight of the boy, she stammered as she told him, “I’ve been sent by your school to help you with nouns and adverbs.” When she left she felt she hadn’t accomplished much. The next day, a nurse asked her, “What did you do to that boy?” The teacher felt she must have done something wrong and began to apologize.

“No, no,” said the nurse. “You don’t know what I mean. We’ve been worried about that little boy, but ever since yesterday, his whole attitude has changed. He’s fighting back, responding to

treatment. It's as though he's decided to live."

Two weeks later the boy explained that he had completely given up hope until the teacher arrived. Everything changed when he came to a simple realization. He expressed it this way: "They wouldn't send a teacher to work on nouns and adverbs with a dying boy, would they?"

This story illustrates the kind of prophetic hope Isaiah holds out for his people. Israel was in a real fix in the time of Isaiah of Jerusalem, the prophet who wrote the first thirty-nine chapters of our present book of Isaiah. In 745 BCE, Tiglath-pileser III became ruler of Assyria and conquered to the west toward the Mediterranean Sea. This included Israel. Soon after Assyria's intentions became clear, Isaiah wrote the words of our morning's text. In the preceding verses, Isaiah used tree imagery and continues to do so in today's text.

In this lesson for the Second Sunday in Advent "Jesse" refers to King David's father. A new "branch" will grow, a sovereign descended from Jesse and David, but this will be a new kind of sovereign. On this sovereign God's "spirit" will rest, as it did in former days on Moses and David, as well as other Israelite leaders. This spirit enabled these heroes of Israel to do the seemingly impossible. Isaiah lists six gifts of God's spirit which God will give this sovereign: "wisdom," "understanding," and "counsel" make him independent of foolish advisers; he will have "might" to defend his people, "knowledge" of God's ways, and "fear" (awe). Fear in the biblical sense means primarily a proper respect for God. This future monarch understands God's plan and has the power to accomplish it. This distinctive sovereign will exercise justice, and uphold the underdog and those who hold God in awe ("the meek"). He will use his chastening "rod" and hot lethal "breath" to destroy the enemies of the people of God.

Beginning at verse 7, the images of peace among animals speak about God's restoration of the ideal state of harmony in paradise prior to human disobedience. As most of us know both the "asp" and the "adder" are poisonous snakes. God will restore the original concord between animals and humans. No one under God's dominion will be in danger. This safety all enjoy is

because all creation will know God, and be obedient to God's will, as surely as "the waters cover the sea." This messianic sovereign ("the root of Jesse") will be a rallying point not just for Judah but for all peoples. All nations, even Gentiles, will see God's feats and "inquire" of God's glory.

Hear the beauty of God's hopeful promise to a despairing Israel and all disheartened people:

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 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. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

6 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. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious (Isaiah 11:1-10).

Martin Luther wrote nearly 500 years ago: "No one has ever fallen so grievously that he may not rise again. Conversely, no one stands so firmly that he may not fall. If Peter (and Paul and Barnabas) fell, I too may fall. If they rose again, I too may rise again." Hope for us and for all God's people is what Advent and Christmas means to us. Advent and Christmas are beyond a doubt the most hope-filled seasons of the church year. However, hope always comes from something that, in itself, does not look all that hope-filled. The stump of Jesse is a case in point. Jesse's stump is the line and lineage of the monarchy in Israel and it is doomed thanks to the Assyrians. David's line is, so to say—kaput! I am not, and neither is Isaiah, speaking about a living stump that won't quite die until you burn it with diesel fuel.

I'm talking about a certifiable dead stump—like in our backyard at the parsonage of Georgetown, Texas. We used the dead stump in question for home plate and a variety of other things. It was dead, dead, dead. My late father-in-law showed my boys how to pass the time by hammering hundreds of nails into it. Nothing looked deader than that stump with hundreds of nails pounded into it. That stump and Israel's prospects for hope looked similar. Despite the deadness of appearances, however, Isaiah speaks the word of God—to Israel and to us:

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

[2] 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.

[3] His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord (Isaiah 11:1-3).

This is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.