What Does Peace Look Like?

Second Sunday in Advent 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

*A shoot will grow out of the stump of Jesse. . .*

*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. 7The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder’s den. 9They 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.*

 *Isaiah 11:1, 6-9*

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb. But the lamb won’t get much sleep.

 Woody Allen

 This eloquent vision of the peaceable kingdom is one of the most quoted by advocates for a just peace. Its familiar words give voice to the yearnings of those of us who seek the shalom of God. Natural enemies feasting in each other’s company: a wolf taking a nap with a lamb, a leopard lying serenely with a prospective next entrée, an infant on the playground having fun with a cobra or black mamba. Think Donald Trump and Nancy Pelosi laughing and having drinks together.

 That vision, Isaiah proclaims, finds its origin in a single event: *A shoot shall grow out of the stump of Jesse, a branch shall sprout from its roots.* A stump. The word in Hebrew connotes a dead thing. A while back, Jayne was given a part of a plumeria plant. The person who gave it to her told her to plant it in the ground and it will grow. I don’t know, I told her, I’m not sure about that. But she did as she was told, sticking it in the ground at the corner of our backyard. It was a sorry looking thing, bent over, drooping leaves; silently, I mused, not a chance. No way, Jose. Jayne watered it faithfully at first, but to no avail. After a while, she must have come to the same conclusion. It was left to its own devices. Then the first rains came and well, you guessed it. It started to perk up. Five years or so later, our neighbor complained: *You really should think about cutting that plumeria plant back.*

 *A shoot will grow out of the stump of Jesse, a branch shall sprout from his roots.* The stump is dead. God had said it would be so. Just before this chapter, God declares punishment on the people: “the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low.” The trees, the people -- both will be clean cut off.

And yet, another word comes from the very same prophet: “*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse . . .*” How can we see this word of promise?

 A plumeria tree overflowing with blossoms where a dead branch had been placed in the ground. There are, I know, scientific explanations why such a thing is possible, yet each time I look at it, that *stubborn shoot* appeared to me a miracle.

 It happens in our human world as well. Barbara Lundblad, who teaches at Union Seminary in New York City, tells of an elderly neighbor. There is a man on my street I've known for years, she recalls. They often met in the morning at the newsstand. Then, his wife died -- forty-two years together changed to loneliness. She watched him walking, his head bowed, his shoulders drooping lower each day. His whole body seemed in mourning, *cut off* from everyone. I grew accustomed to saying, “Good morning” without any response, Professor Lundblad remembers. Until a week ago. She saw him coming and before she could get any words out, he tipped his hat, “Good morning, Reverend. Going for your paper?” He walked beside her, eager to talk. I could not know what brought the change that seemed so sudden. Perhaps, for him, it wasn't sudden at all, but painfully slow. *Like a seedling pushing through rock toward the sunlight.* There must have been an explanation, yet he appeared to her, a miracle. Like a human plumeria tree, life re-entered where death had reigned.

 It happens in our life together as well. I know I’ve spoken this before, but bear with me. Oakhurst Baptist Church in Decatur, GA, a suburb east of metropolitan Atlanta, was a thriving, growing congregation of two thousand white members in the 1950s. As a growing Black middle class began moving into the neighborhood, white flight began. Many of the church members began talking about moving the church’s location further out into the outer ring of suburbs, where people looked more like them. The minister, John Nichol, a prophetic voice, heard the rumors that became a snowball turned avalanche. He began to preach about it, insisting God had called them to minister to that neighborhood, that God’s gift was the burgeoning Black neighborhood. In a matter of months, that two thousand membership church shrunk to five hundred. They had just erected a new Christian Education building and had to figure out how to pay the $4,500 a month mortgage without three-quarters of its members. They were in deep kimchee.

 I can recall for you how they paid that mortgage, but that’s a story for another day. I can tell you how they were able to keep a leaking roof from caving in, but that too is a story for another day. What I do want to tell you is about two young men in that congregation, Andy Loving and Gary Gunderson. They had a grand vision of addressing world hunger from a faith perspective. The church affirmed that vision and gave them a small, dingy room in the basement of that church. They allowed them to use the church’s mimeograph machine. They began by putting out a 6-8-page newsletter they called *Roots,* which they sent to Southern Baptist churches they knew of. Circulation increased. People responded to the plea for donations so they could increase its effectiveness. They eventual became a magazine, whose circulation reached beyond that small mail list. Four years later, they won a major literary award for reporting on hunger in Ethiopia. The New York Times took second place. *A shoot shall grow out from the stump of Jesse, a branch will sprout from its roots.*

 I urge you to remember that Isaiah penned these words to a people sitting on the Tigris River, enslaved by the powerful Babylonians, who destroyed everything they held dear. Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I’ve sat there myself, perhaps you have, too. You may be there now -- at that place where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened your heart.

  God’s Advent word comes to sit with us. This word will not ask us to get up and dance. The prophet’s vision is surprising, but small. The nation would never rise again. The shoot would not become a mighty cedar. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected:

For he grew up before them like a young plant,

and like a root out of dry ground;

he had no form or majesty that we should look at him,

nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. [Isaiah 53: 2]

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse*… fragile yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock-hard tomb.

It will grow in the heart of a man cut off by sorrow until one morning he can look up again. It will grow in the hearts of a shrinking church that was told they could be of no significance anymore. The plant will grow. It will grow from a withered branch into a flowering plumeria tree, giving joy to all who see it.

What if we believe this fragile sign is God’s beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: “Look! Look -- there on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?”

O come, green shoot of Jesse, free

            Your people from despair and apathy;

                        Forge justice for the poor and the meek,

                        Grant safety for the young ones and the weak.

Rejoice, rejoice! Take heart and do not fear,

God’s chosen one, Immanuel, draws near.