



'Celebrate Messiah: Root Deeply'

Second Sunday in Advent
8:15 & 11:00 am, December 4, 2016
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Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church
Camp Hill, Pennsylvania

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#); [Romans 15:4-13](#); [Matthew 3:1-1](#)

Let's pray: May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be pleasing to you, O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

I grieve that my mother's green thumb obviously skipped a generation. I've never had good fortune with flowers, save the small bamboo plant in my office which I can't possibly kill, since it only requires watering. **That** I can do—that was often my downfall with houseplants, anyway: Too much watering.

My mother, on the other hand, could take a slip of stem, place it in well-watered potting soil, and another lovely plant would spring up which she would give to a friend. I'm certain she could relate to the wife of Christian writer Calvin Chinn. Chinn writes how his wife works in a building where the tenants occasionally discard dried-up orchid plants. (I suspect lack of watering was an issue here.) Like someone who takes in abandoned dogs and cats, Calvin's wife brings those dead orchids home, works her green thumb the way my mother does, and nurtures the plants with loving care until tiny shoots and buds appear. Call it her "Rescue Orchid" ministry. Then, once the flowers are blooming again, she gives them away to family and friends.

Perhaps it is not so much a green thumb possessed that does this, but rather a mystery and miracle from God. For how many times have we seen such things happen? Case in point: When Randy and I moved to Camp Hill in 1994, we decided we didn't want quite so many orange daylilies in our backyard. We dug up a fair number of them, leaving only a small portion in one garden plot. We thought we have removed all the rest from the other rock garden. But this one pesky little daylily kept appearing, pushing its way through the crack between two big rocks. Each year, for a number of years, when it appeared, we'd try to dig it out with the smallest trowel we owned that could fit in the crack. But the tuber rooted so deeply in the soil would not give itself up. So **we** finally gave up. The daylily appears each year, a little bigger, a little bolder, and it is slowly splitting apart the two boulders on either side.

Or consider the delicate portulaca, also known as the moss rose. I've tried planting this annual flower several times over the years. I really like this little flower. As do the bunnies in my yard. So much so that I had no portulaca left by mid-summer most years, and I decided this past year NOT to plant any. It appeared anyway. I don't know how. I don't know why. These are annuals. Shouldn't sprout up year to year. But the portulaca appeared. And the bunnies were delighted.

It is this very mystery and miracle of new growth and life that the Lord God urges Isaiah the prophet to envision for his people. As Isaiah speaks to the people of Israel, they are held captive to fear at the hands of a powerful Assyrian empire. It's probably 720 BC, and the northern kingdom of Israel has already fallen to that power. Now Assyria sets its sights on the southern kingdom of Judah and the city of Jerusalem itself. The threat of death and destruction hangs over the head of King Ahaz and his people. It's the end of the line, the end of the dynastic line of the great King David and the end for his people. That line is about to be cut off at its base—it will be just a lifeless stump of a once vibrant tree.

But Isaiah, as God's mouthpiece, has something to say to these events. First, in chapter 10, he prophesies that the Lord God will hew down Assyria's tree. That great power will be destroyed. And then in Chapter 11, Isaiah speaks of a ruler who will arise in Judah. Like the daylily pushing its way out of the darkness between the rocks, or the portulaca breaching the soil, opening its blooms and offering its nourishment to the rabbit...there will be a ruler, a descendant of King David himself, who will arise from those roots. He will govern faithfully, his kingdom shall be filled with peace, and God's people will live in safety and stability. Out of seeming death and the end will come life.

Old Testament scholars suggest Isaiah looked with hope, not toward King Ahaz, but, rather, Ahaz' young son, Hezekiah, envisioning **him** as that very ruler. The reality turned out to be much different from Isaiah's picture-words. Hezekiah, though considerably more faithful and obedient to God than his father Ahaz had been, still could not, in the long run, govern Judah well or save Jerusalem from the onslaught of Assyria. There would be no peaceable kingdom...not just yet.

But don't suppose that Isaiah's words were an untruth; they were simply fulfillment-delayed. That's why we read Isaiah's words on this Second Sunday of Advent. They are words of truth for us and for our whole, dark, seemingly lifeless world because you and I can now hear them as prophecy about Jesus Christ: *A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.* Our great King Jesus hails from that dynastic line of the great King David—we discover that when we read the opening verses of the Gospel of Matthew. Did you perhaps, as I did when I was a young reader, attempt to make your way through the entire New Testament, beginning with that first chapter of Matthew, only to find yourself bogged down in all the “begats” in the King James Version? The “begats” made an important point. Just listen to how the book of Matthew begins: “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David, the son of Abraham.” And then Matthew goes on to say, “Abraham was the father of Isaac, and Isaac the father of Jacob, and Jacob the father of Judah...” and so on, and so forth until at last we read, “...and Jacob the father of Joseph, the husband of Mary, of whom Jesus was born, who is called the Messiah.” You see, Matthew takes great pains from the outset of his gospel to show how Jesus came from the lineage of David. **Jesus** is the shoot that came out of the stump, the ruler the world was awaiting and whom Isaiah envisioned. This Jesus? The One who was put to death on the tree of the cross, and buried in a rock tomb? Yes. For this Jesus is the One who was raised, dead wood and stone giving way to new life. And this Jesus is the One who brings about that same new life in you and me, giving us who live in this dark, seemingly lifeless world a glimpse of what that peaceable kingdom to

come actually looks like. In fact, this Jesus is the One who **invites** you and me to **be glimpses ourselves** of that peaceable kingdom.

And we know that is true—we know that we are to be glimpses of goodness, peace, justice in this world—because you and I have been promised the same powerful Spirit of God that Isaiah said would rest upon that ruler he envisioned so long ago. What did Isaiah prophesy about that ruler? “The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.” And where else do we hear those words? When someone among us is baptized. When a child or a grown-up or a babe-in-arms is well-watered with God's blessing of new life in Christ through baptism. These words are spoken by the pastor as we lay our hands on the baptized person's head and pray for these very gifts of the Spirit. They are not just gifts given to Jesus. They are gifts given to us **because** of Jesus. At our baptism, we are rooted deeply into the life of Jesus Christ, and we are made to blossom.

And then we become, in the hands of the Gardener, a people sent to live that peaceable kingdom in the here and now. With generosity towards those who lack, comfort for those who mourn, encouragement for the weary around us, advocacy for those without voice, and love—pure, sweet love—where it is needed most. In Christ, we become those who nurture and nourish others so they, too, might bloom. **Come, Lord Jesus. Amen.**

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