



Matthew 3:1-12

John the Baptist Prepares the Way

3 In those days John the Baptist came, preaching in the wilderness of Judea and saying, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” 3 This is he who was spoken of through the prophet Isaiah: “A voice of one calling in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way for the Lord, make straight paths for him.’” 4 John’s clothes were made of camel’s hair, and he had a leather belt around his waist. His food was locusts and wild honey. 5 People went out to him from Jerusalem and all Judea and the whole region of the Jordan. 6 Confessing their sins, they were baptized by him in the Jordan River. 7 But when he saw many of the Pharisees and Sadducees coming to where he was baptizing, he said to them: “You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the coming wrath? 8 Produce fruit in keeping with repentance. 9 And do not think you can say to yourselves, ‘We have Abraham as our father.’ I tell you that out of these stones God can raise up children for Abraham. 10 The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 “I baptize you with[b] water for repentance. But after me comes one who is more powerful than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with[c] the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor, gathering his wheat into the barn and burning up the chaff with unquenchable fire.”

Isaiah 11:1-10

The Branch From Jesse

11 A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
2 The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
3 and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
4 but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
5 Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.
6 The wolf will live with the lamb,

the leopard will lie down with the goat,
the calf and the lion and the yearling[a] together;
and a little child will lead them.
7 The cow will feed with the bear,
their young will lie down together,
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.
8 The infant will play near the cobra’s den,
and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest.
9 They will neither harm nor destroy
on all my holy mountain,
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.
10 In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the
peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his resting place will be
glorious.

THESE PASSAGES HAVE HAD ME THINKING ABOUT TREE CHOPPING THIS WEEK. Sometimes chopping sounds like bad news. *Threatening, even.* It brings up an image for me of beautiful redwoods chopped down in the middle of the night.

But sometimes, things need to be chopped down. Forests need to be thinned to be healthy, to prevent fire.

Proverbially, we have a lot of chopping to do—we have systems and structures that aren't working very well in our world anymore, if they ever did. Voices of hate are getting amplified. Billionaires have more money than they could spend in 20 lifetimes, and others of us can't afford housing, healthcare, safety.

I wonder if the "axe against the tree" that John mentions is a promise and not the threat it sounds like it is. Back when I was doing youth ministry, I took a group of desert dwelling kids from Albuquerque up to Sitka, Alaska to work at Sheldon Jackson College for a week. It was a great week.

But one of the jobs the college had for our group was to take down a bunch of trees that were encroaching on the campus. It was a reasonable request for Alaska.

But the kids from New Mexico would't do it. They lived in a place where trees were rare and valuable. The shade from cottonwoods made a real difference in the heat of an Albuquerque summer. They treasured trees and didn't want to participate in their destruction.

So we talked about the difference in location, and about how there really were too many trees invading the campus. And how Sitka had different issues than Albuquerque. And they went off to clear the trees.

They weren't exactly like John the Baptizer, yelling at the trees, "Repent, pine forest! Even now the axe is lying at your roots! Every tree that does not bear good fruit will be CUT DOWN! Don't make me cut you down! Because I will!"

Although, on reflection, perhaps I would have had more volunteers if I had given them the option to be an old school prophet, raining down hellfire and damnation on unrepentant trees.

Sometimes, *things need to come down.* Sometimes the axe against the tree is a promise and not a threat. I know John the Baptist is not the most approachable and personable Biblical character. He could use some social skills. Calling people "broods of vipers" is not, perhaps, the conventional way to win hearts and minds. But people flocked to hear him. Despite his appearance. Despite his rhetoric. They flocked from **All** of Judea, **All** of Jerusalem, to the wilderness, to be baptized by him in the Jordan River.

Even the Sadducees and the Pharisees, people who could have easily had their baptisms of repentance handled from the comfort of the religious structures which they oversaw, even they went to the wilderness.

John is a reminder that when it comes right down to it, people would rather hear an inconvenient truth than platitudes. We seek authenticity even when we wish we could find meaning in hollow happiness.

And we know he's right when we hear his lectures.

We hear the admonishment that the axe is against the tree, and we think of what needs to be chopped down.

Or maybe we don't.

Maybe we prefer the forest we know, even if it is getting a little crowded, and the dead wood makes it difficult to walk under the canopy as we used to.

Maybe, like the Pharisees and Sadducees, we hide behind the trees and say, "*we might be deadwood that isn't bearing fruit, but we're trees that Abraham planted, you can't get rid of us.*"

John tells them that God is able to turn the rocks lying in the riverbed into children of Abraham. The traditions that matter so much, the connection to Abraham, to the past, to our ancestors, is good and real and important.

But if we think our connection to the tradition is more important than bearing good fruit so we can carry that tradition into the future, John reminds us of our folly.

Because the stakes are high.

God has work for us to do in the world. We need to be trees bearing the fruits of the spirit. And if we're not willing to do that, God will plant a new crop of trees.

We're all gathered here, in the midst of this busy holiday season, in a weekend full of rain and cold temperatures, because I think we are still drawn to John's message. We want to be trees that bear good fruit.

And we know we don't always do that.

We are people who make mistakes.

We are people who lose focus.

We get our priorities in the wrong order.

We mistake privilege for divine right.

Each week in worship, we pray a prayer of confession. We lift our voices together to acknowledge we have not lived as God has called us to live. And we repent of our mistakes. And together, we announce our forgiveness, and we pass the peace to each other, celebrating the gift of community that allows us to come together and be authentic and true about who we are.

And I know some of you don't love the confession. It can be seen as depressing.

But I would come to worship each week just for that moment. There is something freeing about being honest about my failures. And it is liberating to raise our voices **together**, to know I'm not alone, and to receive God's grace and mercy **together**. We join our voices with generations of people before us.

We are called to repentance—to acknowledging that we haven't lived as we have been called to live. But this isn't about guilt or wanting people to feel unworthy. This repentance is actually an act of Hope. By repenting, we—as individuals and as a community—come before God and each other and acknowledge that we believe in God's kingdom. We believe that there is a better and more just way of being, of treating each other, and of living together than we can make happen on our own. We believe God can do more with our lives than we could imagine.

And I see the act of confession and the assurance of pardon in John the Baptist's role in the Advent journey.

Because if all we had was John, yelling at us in the desert, how depressing would that be? If all we had was confession with no assurance of pardon, where would our hope be?

This is how I see the axe against the tree as a promise and not the threat it seems to be. Because John goes on from the chopping and starts talking about Jesus.

And that's why we turn to John the Baptist each Advent season.

He recognized something new was happening in the person of Jesus. And he knew we needed to get ready for it.

Because the redemption of the world that happened in the person of Jesus of Nazareth is really good news. And it turned the world upside down.

It showed us that the God who created the universe is still active in the act of creating now.

And this is why stumps aren't all that bad.

As Isaiah describes his vision of a new world, he starts with this line, "a shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

This particular language makes us think about a family tree, and not just any family tree. But the royal line of King David, the son of Jesse. But David's reign didn't work out so well. His **line** lived on, but his family's **reign** was short lived. While Jesus' genealogy connects him back to David, Isaiah likens the family tree to a stump.

A shoot shall come from the stump of Jesse.

And if you look at a stump, like the one on the bulletin cover, it doesn't matter how deep the roots are, it is never again going to be the tree it was.

Tree stumps are not where we seek new life. Tree stumps are where we see what was, what used to be, what we've lost. And it is okay to grieve what has been lost, or what we need to chop down.

But Isaiah invites us to consider stumps in a new way. Hear his prophecy beginning at the end of chapter 10, before our verses pick up for today.

"Look the Sovereign, the Lord of Hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low. God will hack down the thickets of the forest with an axe. And Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

From the stump, from the dead end, from the ruined forest, will grow up a leader with a spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the world. And notice what kind of signal it is: It is not a giant, behemoth, sequoia tree that comes out of the stump of Jesse. It is a tender shoot, a fragile sign of life and beauty. A shoot growing out of a stump is a reminder of both the *tenacity* and the *tenuousness* of life. Fear and selfish concern will not prevail, no matter how much it may seem to be winning in the moment.

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Isaiah didn't know anything about Jesus of Nazareth. He wasn't a fortune teller who was predicting the future in a magical way. He was a prophet of God, a person called by God to proclaim news of God's judgment, God's promise, and God's hope for a future that is better than we can imagine in our wildest dreams.

The people who met Jesus, who heard him speak, who saw him heal, who watched him stand up and speak truth to power, and who heard him preach a message of repentance and of God's grace, all of these people heard Jesus and thought of Isaiah. Jesus embodied for them the message of hope they heard in Isaiah's writing.

And John recognized it too.

"Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

And so, at this second week of Advent, we are here to prepare. To repent. To prepare for the redemption of the world that we know will come in Jesus.

And the images of stumps and ruined forests and dead ends are just a point in the journey we're on.

They aren't an ending when God is telling the story.

Our theme for Advent is Generations to Generations. I think about the generations before us who witnessed endings that created our beginnings.

In my life, my birth mother surely felt some sort of ending when I was born, and she gave me up for adoption. What was a stump in the forest of her life is what has allowed my life to grow, and flourish. I have great compassion for her, and gratitude for the life I'm living. I'm doing what I can do to heal things so my children's struggles will be different than mine were.

Because, as Joann talked about last week, we are called to care for those who will follow us, our descendants, more than we are called to please our ancestors who came before. And that got me thinking about the people who came before us, and how well they provided for us, even at the expense of what their ancestors may have thought.

Our church is in its third location. I think about our ancestors who made the decision to put the proverbial axe to their church buildings, which they surely loved as much as we love this one. God was calling them to a new neighborhood in the city, and they tore down their church and moved it up to here. With hindsight, they could see that they'd made a good decision, but in the moment, as things were being dismantled to be moved and rebuilt, I bet there was grief and worry. *Are we doing the right thing?*

We continue our part of the work and start clearing the ground, cleaning up our messes, planting new trees. Our work in this is different than God's, of course. We can prepare the soil, we can nurture new growth. And then, out of a stump, we'll see a shoot emerging from one of the dead stumps, and we'll be reminded that God does things we cannot do. And that will engender hope in us, and remind us to continue.

Maya Angelou wrote a poem called *Continue*¹. Here's a part of it:

My wish for you
Is that you continue
Continue
To be who and how you are
To astonish a mean world
With your acts of kindness
Continue
To allow humor to lighten the burden
Of your tender heart
Continue
In a society dark with cruelty
To let the people hear the grandeur
Of God in the peals of your laughter
Continue
To let your eloquence
Elevate the people to heights
They had only imagined
Continue
To remind the people that
Each is as good as the other
And that no one is beneath
Nor above you
Continue
To remember your own young years
And look with favor upon the lost
And the least and the lonely
Continue
To put the mantel of your protection
Around the bodies of
The young and defenseless
Continue
To take the hand of the despised
And diseased and walk proudly with them
In the high street
Some might see you and
Be encouraged to do likewise
Continue
To plant a public kiss of concern
On the cheek of the sick
And the aged and infirm
And count that as a
Natural action to be expected
Continue
To let gratitude be the pillow
Upon which you kneel to
Say your nightly prayer
And let faith be the bridge
You build to overcome evil
And welcome good

And so, I invite you, on the journey to Christmas, to notice the stumps, to recognize the axe against the tree may not be a bad thing. Because where we see ending, God creates new beginnings.

We're invited to join in the work of the kingdom, bearing good fruit for the world. And so, we prepare, we chop away the things that no longer give us life, that hold us back from where God is calling us, and we prepare the way.

In Advent, we prepare to share with the world the incredible news that God is still at work in the world, creating life where we see only stumps.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ <https://philebersole.wordpress.com/2016/03/13/continue-a-poem/?fbclid=IwAR1FdDgwA9QtUwiYkNGvKw7mgVD7BswqDUqVHYNCqATaDkymGRoTcX622zg>