

Sermon - 12/04/22
Is 11:1-10; Ps 72; Ro 15:4-13; Mt 3:1-12

Here comes that most eccentric, fiery prophet, John Baptist. He has been living outside Jerusalem preparing to meet Messiah. We know he has been meditating on the writings of that prince of prophets, Isaiah. You heard for yourself this morning: the theme of the tree and the forest – the root and the branch. A chosen, special tree sprouts up in the lowliest way. It comes out of a great devastated forest of trees – which is now a burnt-over field of stumps. This is figurative language that describes the judgment of God. Remember, God's holy judgment is the purging that allows God's grace to come pouring into our lives. Remember also that the theme of the tree resonates throughout the Scriptures as a symbol of the human being created by God.

Let's return to the 8th c BC to look in on the society of the A.N.E. The great nation of Assyria is growing in its trade and influence throughout the region – and, as always, this kind of expansion is accompanied by military as well as economic war. These folks are originally from the area around the fertile crescent now known as Kurdistan. Kurdistan has been claimed by all the surrounding nations: Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. Today, Kurds proudly say that they are descended from the Assyrians. In the 700s BC they were the fastest growing nation and among the most brutal societies in the known world.

Israel sat like a delicious plum at the crossroads of all the major trade routes from Babylon to Egypt. Isaiah saw well ahead what would come to pass into the next 300 years – by the working of God, the Holy Spirit, in his heart and mind. John Baptist spent a lot of time praying and meditating on Isaiah's words. The Lord was dealing with him – the Lord was speaking to John concerning the momentous changes about to come upon the whole world. God sent John Baptist to announce that Messiah was coming into the world – and to prepare the way for Him.

The Book of Isaiah has been building and building God's case against His beloved Judah. Israel was destroyed in the early 8th c BC by Assyria. It will be some centuries before Judah is also conquered and deported by the Babylonians. Isaiah is weaving the literary tapestry of a forest – filled with magnificent, proud and arrogant trees – about to be cut down and burned. The prophet speaks of consequences for Judah, and also consequences for Assyria. God is using Assyria as a rod to chastise His own beloved people – but God tells Isaiah He will not only chastise Assyria in its turn, but the very existence of Assyria will end. It will cease to be a nation – in 609 BC. The alliance of the Chaldeans and the Medes crushed the Assyrians out of existence. The Bible tells us it is the Lord who causes nations to rise and fall. Amen.

John Baptist deals with the crusty, entrenched temple leaders, the Sadducees and Pharisees. By contrast, Paul deals with the Gentiles. John preaches the coming of a grown-up rabbi named Jesus of Nazareth. Paul continues after Jesus returns to His heavenly home to spread the Good News of all that Jesus has done for every creature in the universe. Both John and Paul draw on the great metaphor of the root of Jesse, who was not a great king. He was a farmer and rancher in the region of Ephrathah, or Bethlehem.

This root of Jesse – the Branch of David – is to be the one Ruler to whom all peoples will turn. Isaiah proclaims that He (Messiah the Christ) stands as an ensign – a signal – like a flag on a flagpole – the bringer of peace and true justice and pure motives to the world. This shall be the glorious outcome of His arrival in the world. Our psalm, number 72, was written about the administration of Solomon. We sing it today as a reminder that the line of Jesse, David's great-grandfather, Solomon's great, great grandfather – is bringing in the mightiest King of all ages. His kingdom is the eternal kingdom. The fruit of that tree is the best fruit ever. The fruit borne by Jesse's tree is Jesus Christ. Messiah, Jesus the Christ is also the seed of Abraham. The Creator God intended from before the foundation of the world, to send your Savior.

This morning we look out upon this vast ruin – a chopped down, burnt out forest. The New Testament writers draw upon Isaiah's panorama of desolation and despair – and liken it to the Roman occupation of their nation – called Judea by the Roman power brokers. There is only weeping and mourning and a broken spirit. Where is the Lord? Where is

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the working of God's powerful Word?

The answer is in Isaiah – it's in the Letter to the Romans – it's in the Gospel of Matthew.

In the heaps of black ashes around the hacked off stump of Jesse – wait a minute – what is this?

A fifteen-year-old girl pregnant out of wedlock. Is she a princess? No, she's a country girl of obscure birth, making her way to Bethlehem. Her husband-to-be is doing his best to find a decent hotel where she can rest and give birth to a son who is not even his own child.

Out of the stump of the Jesse tree comes one fragile green shoot – a small branch springing up out of the scorched earth.

“The Spirit of the Lord will rest on Him,

The spirit of wisdom and understanding,

The spirit of counsel and strength,

The spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

And He will delight in the fear of the Lord...” Behold the power of the Word of God. Amen.