

INI

Isaiah 11,1-5

1st Sunday After Christmas — 27 December 2015

Greeting: To those who are called, sanctified by God the Father, and preserved in our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ; mercy, peace, and love be multiplied unto you. Amen.

We hear a portion of the first lesson from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah, which was read earlier:

Then a shoot will spring from the stem of Jesse,
And a branch from his roots will bear fruit.

So far the reading. Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of our hearts, be acceptable in Thy sight, O LORD, our Strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

Introduction: In 1980, Mt. St. Helens in Washington State became an active volcano and erupted. The top of the mountain blew off. The forests that lay around the mountain were devastated. Millions of trees over thousands of acres were blown down. The landscape looked like the face of the moon — everything was covered by grey, volcanic ash. Everything looked dead!

If you looked over that grey and devastated landscape you would think that nothing could grow. Indeed, scientists predicated that it would take decades before anything would grow again.

But the scientists were wrong. Within less than five years growth began. Animals slowly returned.

A devastated landscape, however, is the background to today's reading from Isaiah.

While God promised His people that it would be He who would defeat their enemies, because they did not listen, God also promised destruction on the land of His people on account of their wickedness, their sin. Both kinds of destruction are likened to the destruction of a forest.

Against His people God says:

For wickedness burns like a fire;
It consumes briars and thorns;
It even sets the thickets of the forest aflame,
And they roll upward in a column of smoke.
By the fury of the Lord of hosts the land is burned up,
And the people are like fuel for the fire. (Isaiah 9,18-19)

I've driven by both clear cuts and lands ravaged by forest fires. The landscape is ugly and lifeless. The land looks like a gigantic scar. This backdrop of devastation, of deforested lands, is more than a physical description of a wasteland. It is a description of sin and its consequences. It is as if a spiritual Mt. St. Helens erupted and left a lifeless landscape. It is a landscape of grey, a shroud of death, and death is the consequence of sin.

How then will life come back in the face of death and devastation? Isaiah gives us the answer. Life will come back because the Lord will bring life out of what is seemingly dead. Life will come from humble beginnings, from a lifeless stump in a devastated forest. This brings me to my sermon theme for today, "**In Deepest Humility, Jesus Comes To Us.**" I'll develop this theme in three parts:

- 1) Humble Beginnings;**
- 2) A Humble Life;** and,
- 3) A Humble Jesus Gives Us Life**

1) Humble Beginnings. What do we expect from a stump

standing in a lifeless and devastated forest? Probably not much. If the stump is new, we do not expect much to happen in a short period of time. If the stump has been there for a while, we might take a wait-and-see approach as to whether the stump is good for anything except perhaps stump removal.

God speaks of “the shoot [that] will spring from the stem of Jesse.” This “stem of Jesse” is really a stump. The word is related to the verb which means “to cut down,” “to separate,” “to divide in two.” This cutting makes the “stem” a “stump.”

Later in Isaiah God makes it clear that this stump is placed on parched, arid soil. Isaiah writes of the coming Messiah, Jesus:

For He grew up before [God] like a tender shoot,
And like a root out of parched ground. (Isaiah 53,2)

This all sounds more and more unpromising, doesn't it? A stump in a wasteland. Not only in a wasteland, but in an arid waste land. We all know that plants need water. But here water is lacking. What will develop is due to God's plan and not man's.

God speaks about Jesse. Who is Jesse? Jesse is the father of David. But Jesse did not live in a palace. He was not surrounded by many servants. No one waited on him. He was a shepherd who had eight sons, the youngest of whom was usually in the fields tending his father's flocks. The youngest was David. And where did Jesse and his family live? In Bethlehem! (1 Samuel 16,4ff)

God does not speak of king David, but of his father. Here in Isaiah, God stresses the humble beginnings of the house of David. God speaks about an arid land, because close to a thousand years after David lived, in the time of Jesus, no Davidic king sat on the throne. In fact the land was occupied by the Romans and a Roman governor ruled the land.

Even the rabbis interpret Isaiah's prophecy as applying to the coming Messiah. After Jesus' birth Wise Men came from the East and the Bible scholars in Jerusalem told them that the "King of the Jews" would be born in Bethlehem (Matthew 2,5-6).

And it came about that while they were [in Bethlehem], the day was completed for [Mary] to give birth. And she gave birth to her first-born son; and she wrapped Him in cloths, and laid Him in a manger, because there was no room for them in the inn. (Luke 2,6-7)

These were indeed humble beginnings. Jesus was not born in a palace in Jerusalem, but in a stall behind the village inn in a small village. He was not dressed in purple, the color of kings, but wrapped in swaddling cloths. He was not surrounded by attendants, but just His step-father Joseph and His mother Mary. Town criers did not go throughout the land to proclaim His birth, but angels from the realms of glory came to shepherds who were in the field and told them that their Savior had been born. The joy of Jesus' birth was first shared with society's outcasts, shepherds.

The outward circumstances of Jesus' birth were humble, in keeping with Isaiah's prophecy. But more than that, Jesus led a

2) A Humble Life. The true nature of Jesus' humble circumstances are not to be measured in outward appearance. We are not to wax too sentimental about His humble birth. Isaiah elsewhere describes Jesus as "A man of sorrows and acquainted with grief" (Isaiah 53,3). Paul says of Jesus:

Who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a servant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a Cross. (Philippians 2,6-8)

With Paul as our guide, we see that Jesus' humiliation began with His birth. This was not the humiliation of being born in a feeding trough, but the humiliation of giving up the glory of heaven to live for us in our skin. It all began there in Bethlehem. God became a man and this Man, Jesus, became our Servant.

He grew out of the stump of the line of Jesse. But this word "stump" in Hebrew is also related to cutting. In a related word, it means the land of separation. But this was a special land and a special separation. It was the land of separation where on the Day of Atonement in the Old Testament the sacrificial goat was taken out to die. The goat symbolically took the sins of the people into the land of separation, into an arid and waterless wilderness, and there died.

In His thirties, Jesus took our sins into a land of separation. He was the sinless Son of God Who had been born in Bethlehem. But now outside of the walls of Jerusalem, in a land apart, He fulfilled the duties of a Servant on our behalf and died for our sins and the sins of the world. On the Cross He said, "I thirst" (John 19,28). He was in a waterless place.

He came in humility and died in humility. But on the third day after His death, He was raised in glory (1 Corinthians 15,43). His humiliation came to an end with His death. His descent into Hell was part of His glorious triumph over sin, death, and the power of the devil, to announce to them that He is the Lord of the living over Whom they have no power for He has won the victory (1 Peter 3,18-19; 1 Corinthians 15,54ff).

In humbleness He came to a sin sick world in a stable in Bethlehem. Now He is the Lord of glory. How does He come to us?

3) A Humble Jesus Gives Us Life. Even though in exaltation Jesus now sits at the right hand of the Father, Jesus reaches out into our sin-darkened world to grant us forgiveness on account of His death and resurrection. For our sake, this forgiveness is offered because He continues to be our Servant.

In Bethlehem, God the Son became true man — but without giving up being God. This is a great mystery that is beyond our grasp. But Scripture clearly teaches that Jesus is both true man and true God. As Paul says: “And by common confession great is the mystery of godliness: [God] was revealed in the flesh...” (1 Timothy 3,16). And as John says: “...the Word was God ... And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us” (John 1,1+14).

He dwelt among us so that we would be sure that we have a God Who knows us. He knows us from the helplessness of childhood – to the helplessness of old age. He knows that by nature we would be separated from God on account of sin. By nature we would live with the consequences of sin, that is, temporal and eternal death. He knows that we would live in a spiritual wasteland and by ourselves could not approach God on account of our sin.

But the shoot that springs from the root of Jesse has transformed that stump into a life-giving tree. This tree of life is none other than Jesus and we are now its branches. Jesus called Himself a vine and believers the branches (John 15,1ff). Paul says we have been grafted into a tree of faith (Romans 11,19ff).

It is in that Word of forgiveness that God can do what man cannot do — give spiritual life to the spiritually dead. By nature, we would be spiritually dead stumps in a spiritually dead forest, whose trees are covered with the ash and greyness of sin, the shroud of death. But in love, Jesus has called us to Himself to give us life.

We have been grafted into Jesus through the waters of Holy Baptism. We are nourished through the Word which proclaims to us that for His sake our sins are forgiven. We are further nourished through the communion wafer and cup of wine by which He shares with us His true Body and Blood, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of sins.

Beginning in Bethlehem Jesus has borne fruit. What is His fruit?

It is the life that He won for us by taking on our flesh and living and dying for us. As Scripture says:

Since then the children share in flesh and blood, [Jesus] Himself likewise also partook of the same, that through death He might render powerless him who had the power of death, that is, the devil; and might deliver those who through fear of death were subject to slavery [of sin] all their lives. (Hebrews 2,14-15; cf also, Romans 6,17)

In Bethlehem, Jesus took on our flesh to begin a divine rescue mission. His whole life was devoted to rescuing those caught in the slavery of sin.

But being a Servant does not mean that He is weak. Daily He calls us to leave the dead spiritual forest of sin. Daily He calls us to confess our sins and be made right with God. Daily He calls us to crucify our sinful flesh and live for Him and with Him, just as He lives for us and with us (cf Romans 6,6).

Jesus has borne fruit in loving us with a love that took Him not only to Bethlehem but also to the Cross. And so He asks us to bear fruit in Him by loving others with the love with which He has loved us (John 15,9ff). He comes to us not in power but humbly, under Word and Sacrament.

Conclusion. What is the miracle of Christmas? That a baby was born in Bethlehem? Yes, but much more.

The miracle is that God risked all to become one of us. He took on our flesh. He took on our infirmities. He became subject to our death.

Because Jesus lived and died for us, we see with what love God loved us. The love of Christmas is not only that God took on our flesh, but that for us He went to the Cross. There he really died.

But in His death, the “shoot that will spring from the stump of Jesse” was not cut off. Jesus rose from the death on the third day, never to die again.

Now that He is risen, Jesus calls us to be His branch in His tree of life. This is a tree that was watered with His blood. But in a wasteland of sin, it is the only tree that gives life.

Just as He came to us in humbleness, so He humbles Himself in Word and Sacrament to call us to Himself. He calls us to repent of sin, be assured of forgiveness, and share the love which He has given us. This is a love which proclaims:

And there is salvation in no one else; for there is no other name under heaven and earth that has been given among men, by which we must be saved. (Acts 4,12). Amen.

Now, the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

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