**Hope Where There Is No Hope**

December 22, 2019

Isaiah 11:1-10

Key verse 11:1 “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”

We celebrate Christmas for two reasons. First, to celebrate Jesus’ coming to earth as a baby in the manger. Second, we renew our longing for his second coming as King of kings to bring his kingdom of righteousness and peace. If you listen to Christmas carols, you will notice that many hymns are about his second coming. Jesus’ second coming is a source of our hope. A stump refers to that bit of the tree that is left when the rest has been completely cut down. It represents hopelessness. In that hopelessness, there is hope. Have you seen a shoot coming up from a stump? Most people do not think of much when they look at the shoot. It is such an insignificant branch. Nothing will come out of it, they say; we tend to notice the big things in life, seasons of growth, development, the bigger the better, big productions, the biggest Christmas decoration light show, the most inches on our new television screen, the greater the immediate impact - it seems that we are people who judge with our eyes and decide by what we hear. Israel was like us. Israel faced God’s judgment due to their sins. Those large trees were cut down to nothing, their land laid waist, their defeat was bitter, their depression overwhelming, their grief beyond consolation. But Isaiah reminded them of a small thing, if only they would turn their eyes and hope toward it, a small shoot that was coming out of the stump of Jesse. Too small to notice, to infantile to care about. They passed by this stump, on their way to exile, they hardly noticed the shoot, all they could think of was their glory that was now past. Are we any different? We notice the big things, the bigger the better. After all, that is the Canadian way. Our toys have to be bigger. Our churches have to be bigger. Our homes have to be bigger. But this passage shows that God’s work is in a tiny shoot, and God gives hope where there is no hope.

Look at verse 1. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Here we have this phrase “the stump of Jesse.” Jesse is the father of King David. About a thousand years before Jesus came, the family tree of Jesse shot up tall and strong. Through his youngest son, David, the Lord brought this family as the leading family of Israel. He was a mighty King and without a doubt the most famous king Israel ever had. Through him God started a royal trunk with many family branches. At David’s time, this royal house can be pictured as a tall tree. About twenty of David’s descendants had served as kings in Jerusalem, but many of them had abused their high office. Many ruled selfishly instead of in the interest of God’s people. Some were idol worshippers and actually led the people of Judah into idol worship. Then God’s judgment struck as a chainsaw at the trunk of a tree. The once powerful nation of Israel was cut down by an invading army from Babylon. All that was left was a stump of what had once been a great tree. At the time the Son of God came to earth, there was no descendant of King David on the throne in Jerusalem. As a matter of fact, that royal house had fallen so far that Isaiah didn’t even call it the house of David; he called it by David’s father’s name and honestly spoke of it as the stump of Jesse.

Then, miraculously, a tiny shoot sprouted from that decaying stump. Out of this very unpromising almost dead stump, God will grow up a small, seemingly not very important, green shoot that has life in it. This is the nature of the way God works. It is the way he has worked throughout history. When we think about how Jesus came into the world, he came as a baby in a manger at a time when the Roman Empire was so powerful. Caesar Augustus was the most well-known emperor. He proclaimed himself as the saviour of the world’s discouraged, dispirited, and confused people. He was going to save the world by his brilliant politics, his careful administration, his powerful military, his excellent economics, and by the beauty and magnificence of Roman culture, called Pax Romana. That is why he ordered a census to be taken, and Joseph and Mary had to go to Bethlehem even though Mary was in a full term. But when Jesus was born, nobody cared or noticed. No one gave him a room in the inn. That is why Joseph and Mary had to go to a stable and Jesus was born there. Yet this small tiny baby would grow up to change the world, to fundamentally change the history of mankind forever.

One person described him this way: “He was born in an obscure village. The child of a peasant woman. He worked in a carpenter shop until he was thirty. He never wrote a book. He never held a political office. He never had a family or owned a house. He didn’t go to college. He never travelled 200 miles from the place where he was born. He never did one of the things that usually accompany greatness.” Another person observed: Socrates taught for 40 years, Plato for 50, Aristotle for 40 BUT Jesus for only 3 1/2 years. Yet his influence infinitely transcends the impact left by the combined years of the teachings from all the world’s greatest philosophers. Jesus composed no music. Still Handel, Beethoven, and Bach reached their highest perfection of melody in the music they composed in his praise.

2000 years have come and gone, and today he is the central figure of the human race. All the armies that ever marched, all the navies that ever sailed, all the parliaments that ever sat, and the kings that ever reigned have not affected the life of men on this earth as much as one tiny shoot from the stump of Jesse. 2000 years ago, Israel was more concerned with being counted in Caesar’s census than they were about being saved. To certain extent, they were actively expecting a Messiah, someone sent from God to deliver them; they expected someone who would lead a powerful army to crush their enemy, the Roman empire. The last thing they expected was a little baby born in a manger with rejected parents of absolutely no standing in the community. The last thing they expected was an infant king.

God is present in the small things, in the people who hardly matter, in the historical events that would otherwise be forgotten, in the places none would call special. He avoids the pomp, the pride, the monuments, and the big show, and comes in humility to people who are humble, he comes as a shoot out of a dead stump - but his kingdom is like a mustard seed, it may be very small, but small beginnings do not determine the end. And his kingdom, though it starts like a small mustard seed, will bring justice to the earth. With power Isaiah prophesies, he will lift up the humble and send the rich away empty. With absolute power and divine sovereign authority, he will destroy the abusing powers of evil and heal those who have been victimized. Of his kingdom, there will be no end.

Zechariah 4:10 says, “Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin.” All of Jesus ministry was by the small things - he started his ministry with a few country fishermen and hated-by-all tax collectors, those he touched and healed were almost always discounted in Jewish culture - foreigners who had no standing, sinners who were looked down upon, lepers who were always avoided, paralytics who were powerless, and the deeply troubled demon possessed. When his followers became numerous, he called them to take up their cross and follow him, but the cost was too high and many left at his message of suffering. The few that remained with him to the end could hardly be called faithful - yet it was those small ones with which he chose to build an eternal kingdom. God works, God reveals himself, in the small things. That was the way in Bethlehem 2000 years ago when he sent Jesus as a baby in the manger. God continues to work that way today. His kingdom grows by the small things, the small things we say to others, the small acts of kindness that characterize our lives, the small sacrifices we make for the kingdom of God. It is not by might, nor by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord. (Zechariah 4:6) God comes to us in the small things, he reveals himself to us in those small words, those small expressions and above all in a small child wrapped in clothes and lying in a manger. Do you see God, hear God, in the small things of your life?

But when Jesus comes again, he will come as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will come in power and glory. Every knee shall bow and every tongue confess that Jesus is Lord. Come, Lord Jesus. When he comes, he will establish the kingdom of God on earth where peace and righteousness rule. Verses 6-9 are a beautiful picture of his kingdom: “The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra’s den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper’s nest. 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.”

In verse 1 the prophet Isaiah talks about Jesus’ first coming, but in verses 6-9, he is talking about his second coming. He does not distinguish the two comings. In fact, Isaiah may not have known that Jesus would come twice. We called this the “prophetic perspective.” The way Old Testament prophets looked at the future was the way we may look at a mountain range from a distance. If you look at Mount Everest, it looks like one mountain from a distance. But in fact, if you start hiking, you find that it is not merely one mountain, but a series of ever-higher ridges with valleys in between. From where Isaiah stood, God granted him to see the Mount Everest of the future. Some of the nearer ridges of Assyrian invasion he knew were very near and when they would happen. But beyond that there were other events he saw on Mount Everest with no clear idea about how distant they were. So repeatedly in the prophetic books, you read of an imminent attack or deliverance from an enemy, and the next moment you read about an event in the distant future, with no indication of how much time is in between. In this sense, we are much more privileged than the Old Testament prophets which may sound strange, since they were inspired by God, and we are not. There are three reasons for that. Firstly, we have all the prophets so we can compare them with each other; secondly, we have the New Testament use of the prophecies, and thirdly, we have the perspective of 2,700 years to see what has happened. So, strange as it may sound, we may understand the timing and the relationships of some things more clearly than Isaiah did. That is why Jesus said, “Blessed are your eyes because they see, and your ears because they hear. For truly I tell you, many prophets and righteous people longed to see what you see but did not see it, and to hear what you hear but did not hear it.” (Mt 13:16-17)

Look at verse 10. “On 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.” “The root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples.” Here Isaiah talks of the root becoming a banner which is a bit of a mixed metaphor but we will forgive him because he is a poet. We know what roots are, and here a banner refers to a flag used at a time of battle where people gather. How does Jesus move from being the root, something so small that people hardly noticed on his arrival, to something so big that nations would rally to him, and he would provide a place of glorious rest? This banner, this very public raising up of the sign of the Messiah refers to the cross and what Jesus achieved on the cross. John 12:32-33 says, “But I, when I lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself. He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die.” And it is what happened! He has drawn all men to himself. There were about 120 followers of Jesus in those days after his crucifixion and resurrection. Now they say there is roughly two billion believers. In Canada, we can make the mistake of thinking that Christianity is in decline, worldwide that is not the case; there are spiritual revivals going on in South America, Africa and China. The cross of Jesus became the place where anyone of us can come, bringing our sin, bringing our shame, bringing those things that we have done that we know in our hearts and conscience separates us from our Father in heaven. At the very heart of Christmas is the story of a loving God who sent his Son into the world to live with us, to understand us, to counsel us, to teach us through his wisdom and understanding, and most importantly to forgive us and bring us back into a relationship with our Father in heaven. It is that restored relationship with our Father, through faith in his Son Jesus that brings us peace. It can be a simple prayer, “Lord, you know and I know I have messed up, Jesus Son of David, have mercy on me, a sinner.”

In conclusion, the shoot of Jesse came out of that stump and became a banner for the peoples. Perhaps some of you here today will think that is all a bit poetic, that it is interesting that Isaiah could write all that stuff about Jesus, but what exactly does this have to do with me? All I would say is that without Jesus there is no shoot, there is only a stump. A stump with no true hope, and ultimately no life. Isaiah saw his people in spiritual crisis and impending disaster. If we are honest, we all have stump-like elements in our life; many of us are struggling with life problems. We might have stump like disappointments with life having not turned out as we wanted, deep down feeling there must be something more. Isaiah’s message is that there is. That with Jesus there is not only the stump but the green shoot. He is waiting to take root in each of our lives if we let him. We long to see him return in glory with righteousness and peace. Come, Lord Jesus.

Big Idea: Even in a stump, there is hope in Jesus