

## **“Imagine Hope”**

**December 4, 2022**

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### **Isaiah 11:1-10 (CEB)**

A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots.

<sup>2</sup>The LORD’s spirit will rest upon him,  
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
a spirit of planning and strength,  
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD.

<sup>3</sup>He will delight in fearing the LORD.  
He won’t judge by appearances,  
nor decide by hearsay.

<sup>4</sup>He will judge the needy with righteousness,  
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.  
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;  
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.

<sup>5</sup>Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,  
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.

<sup>6</sup>The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.

<sup>7</sup>The cow and the bear will graze.  
Their young will lie down together,  
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

<sup>8</sup>A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole;  
toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den.

<sup>9</sup>They won’t harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.  
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD,  
just as the water covers the sea.

This is the story of two trees.

One tree was hardy and strong. It grew slowly but steadily, with strong limbs and a spread of leaf that provided wonderful shelter and shade, fruit that was sweet and good. But it wasn’t carefully pruned. Over time, it became misshapen, branches reaching in directions they weren’t intended to grow and causing stress on the trunk. It grew less and less healthy.

Eventually, it stopped bearing fruit altogether. The trunk could no longer support the weight of its reach, and limbs began to break off. There was nothing left to do but to cut it down.

The other was a fast-growing variety, prolific in leaf and producing hard and plentiful nuts. It quickly spread upward and outward, dominating the landscape and towering over every other tree nearby. It was very impressive, though its wood was too hard to use and the nuts were bitter, covering the ground and altering the soil. Because it consumed so many resources and threatened the survival of the nearby trees, the woodsman had to cut it down.

The stump of that second tree remained for a while, but eventually began to rot until it disappeared altogether. But the first stump remained – lifeless by all appearances at first. But one day a remarkable thing happened: a shoot began to sprout from it. It grew slowly but steadily, a sign of life from what once appeared dead, a second chance at a better life.

Isaiah uses this image to describe the futures of two kingdoms. The first is Judah, the whose capital was Jerusalem, the land of the people of God. The second is Assyria, an empire that expanded rapidly and ruled harshly, forcing tribute and hard labor from those they defeated. In the time of Isaiah, Judah was weak – the northern kingdom of Israel had already fallen, and Judah tried to hold on as long as possible, forming desperate alliances that only angered the Assyrians. The prophets spoke of their downfall as divine judgment, the result of breaking the covenant with God and worshiping foreign idols. They would be cut down, but that would not be the end of their story. Out of the stump, a new sprout would one day form.

Assyria, on the other hand, looked unstoppable. But their rapid expansion and heavy taxation led to an uprising from the Babylonians, Chaldeans, Medes, and Scythians that would soon destroy the empire. Isaiah described that too as God's judgment in response to the

threats against Jerusalem. These are the closing verses of the chapter that precedes today's reading:

*Look! The LORD God of heavenly forces  
is chopping off the branches with terrible power.  
The loftiest ones are about to be cut down  
and the exalted laid low.  
He will strike down the forest thickets with an ax,  
and mighty Lebanon will fall. (Isaiah 10:33-34)*

That's Assyria's fate, a prophecy of doom for an empire of aggression. Then, as we begin a new chapter, we come to a word of hope for Judah:

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots. (Is. 11:1)*

Jesse is the father of King David. Isaiah proclaims that out of the remnant of God's people, a future would emerge. Isaiah's message was a bold proclamation of hope in a hopeless time: *What looks dead to you now is not dead. God will bring forth new life from what remains.*

God had promised David that his house and his lineage would never end and that his descendants would rule as kings. The prophets held on to this promise in foretelling the coming Messiah, the anointed one who would come from the Davidic line to save God's people. Isaiah says that the LORD's spirit will rest upon him: a spirit that will guide him in practical matters (wisdom and understanding), in the geopolitical sphere (counsel and might), and in the realm of faith (understanding and fear of the LORD). The coming Messiah will not judge through personal observation or conventional wisdom, but with righteousness and equity; not with weapons of destruction, but with the word and wisdom of God. Christians read Isaiah 11 in the context of Jesus, particularly at this time of year. Jesus, the one we call the Christ, the anointed one, epitomized the vision of a Messiah who would bring peace through justice and humility.

Isaiah offers a radical vision of peace that the anointed one will bring:

*The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow and the bear will graze.  
Their young will lie down together,  
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.  
A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;  
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den. (Is. 11:6-8)*

Whoever heard of a wolf cuddling with a lamb, leopards and goats making friends, lions grazing in the field alongside calves, bears passing up steak dinners, or infants cuddling with snakes? No one. It is inconceivable, unimaginable...which is why Isaiah described it that way. He needed to get people out of their mindset of what is real and possible and into the realm of imagination, to see in a different way, so their minds could be open to divine revelation.

Isaiah's vision was a word of hope to a people who had lost hope. Though we are not under direct attack from a foreign power, we can relate. Our hope has been under assault lately. If we haven't *lost* hope, we've at least scaled back our expectations of what's possible. Some of us here today need a word of hope – not just for a distant future, but now. I know the struggles some of you are facing, the disappointments and losses and anxieties that you carry. Others I do not yet know, though I would welcome the opportunity to learn what you are going through. Burdens are easier to bear when we share them. I may not know the specifics, but someone here today needs a word of hope. Like those trees, you may be feeling cut off or cut down. Your hope has been eroded through anxiety to fear to helplessness or cynicism. *Maybe this is all there is. It's never going to get better. I'm on my own. I just have to deal with it.* This is not where your story ends, because it isn't where God's story ends. What may seem finished,

lifeless, left behind is the very point where hope begins. It may only be a tiny shoot, but it will come. Even now, whatever your circumstances, God is bringing forth new life. Can you see it?

To hope requires courage. Hope requires us to risk disappointment, that what we hope for will not come to be. As followers of Jesus, we dare to hope – not because we are just naturally hopeful people, but because as followers of Jesus, we have learned to hope even in the darkest times. We know that after Friday comes Sunday. We have seen broken lives put back together in Christ. We experience bread and juice becoming the living presence of Christ that makes us one. We know, in the words of the Apostle Paul, that hope does not disappoint. We are people of hope who have faith that God can do things we can't yet see or even imagine, because we've seen God do it again and again. God's word inspires hope, and God invites us to go along in making that hope a reality. Because of that, hope is more than a feeling or a posture. It is *our mission*, who we are called to be as God's people. Victoria Safford put it this way:

Our mission is to plant ourselves at the gates of Hope — not the prudent gates of Optimism, which are somewhat narrower; nor the stalwart, boring gates of Common Sense; nor the strident gates of Self-Righteousness, which creak on shrill and angry hinges (people cannot hear us there; they cannot pass through); nor the cheerful, flimsy garden gate of “Everything is gonna be all right.” But a different, sometimes lonely place, the place of truth-telling, about your own soul first of all and its condition, the place of resistance and defiance, the piece of ground from which you see the world both as it is and as it could be, as it will be; the place from which you glimpse not only struggle, but joy in the struggle. And we stand there, beckoning and calling, telling people what we are seeing, asking people what they see.<sup>1</sup>

Hope is our mission. Where are the stumps in your life? Can you yet see new life emerging? If you're struggling to find hope, know that you are not alone. As followers of Jesus,

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<sup>1</sup> Victoria Safford. *The Impossible Will Take a Little While*. Edited by Paul Rogat Loeb. New York: Basic Books (2014), 229.

we are called together to stand at the gates of Hope, to point to signs of hope and help one another see what we cannot see. *We are in the hope business*, carrying on Christ's work in the world until every life is restored in relationship with God and experiences wholeness. How can we help one another to have hope, to keep going, to see what God still longs to bring forth?

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots.* What looked lifeless can yet bring forth life. What seems hopeless can be hopeful again. Imagine hope. Embrace the life God is bringing forth. Amen.