

“What to Do about Deadwood”

Sermon: Year A, Advent 2

Texts: Isaiah 11:1–10, Matthew 3:1–12

Preached: December 8, 2019 at Immanuel Lutheran Church, Evanston, IL

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. AMEN

Our house out in Elgin is in a neighborhood called Century Oaks, and indeed, almost every lot is graced with at least one towering, ancient oak tree—or at least an oak tree planted in the early 1960s, seedlings that became mighty oaks. We’re on a pie-shaped one-acre lot that is bordered in back by a corner of the forest preserve and by the soccer field of a private school. Not every tree is a mighty oak, though. We have our share of ash and poplar, pears, volunteer trees that just sort of sprung up where nature planted them, and that have considerably shorter lives than oaks. The thicket along the edges of our back yard has a few trees that are barren and dead, standing as silent reminders of the life that once coursed through them.

That part of the thicket is actually an easement for the utility companies. A couple of years back, I called Commonwealth Edison because a tree in the easement had died and was threatening their wires and potentially the transformer. So they sent out a crew who cut off a single, huge offending branch, though the whole tree was dead. They merely sawed it off and left it suspended there, caught by the twigs on the other trees as it dropped ... and so now it was hanging directly over a pathway that the kids from the private school in back of us had worn smooth as they cut through our yard to avoid walking down a busy street. It was literally swaying and creaking in the breeze. I couldn’t reach it to make it fall. It was a dangerous situation. I kept calling and calling Customer Service, and they kept saying it wasn’t their responsibility. Finally I sent a photo of how they had left it, and they realized the danger, or at least the liability. They sent a crew out the next day to take it down. In the process they cut the rest of the dead tree down, razed to a short stump, leaving all the chunks of trunk lying scattered on the ground. I’m sure you’ve seen the handiwork of Commonwealth Edison. Arborists, they’re not.

The tree was at the back of the property, so I hadn’t really paid much attention after that. I figured it was done, and the wood would simply decay and rot and return to the soil at some point. But recently, just after the snow we had, the dog’s ball bounced into the thicket. He refused to go in after it, so I pushed my way through to retrieve it. The weedy plants had grown thick over the time since the tree had been felled, emboldened by the extra light they received, twining over the hunks of wood that lay there. Then I looked at the stump, and I saw sticking up from it one little shoot with a few spindly, frozen leaves on it, pushing its way up from what was once an enormous, strong tree. I realized that that tree has started to regrow itself. In the spring, I have every reason to believe that little twig will burst forth with life. It’s a long way from being a huge tree again, almost ridiculous to call it a tree ... but it is alive, and surviving, and creating something new.

That’s the image we have in Isaiah. This portion of Isaiah is being written for people who have been living under corrupt government that eventually rotted and was toppled by an invading power that had taken the best and the brightest folks away in exile, leaving behind cities laid waste by war, crumbled infrastructure, their way of life, everything they had counted on, now destroyed. But the good news that Isaiah announces is that what appears to be destroyed, what appears to be dead, isn’t, really. Life is still in it. There is hope. Restoration will come, and it will be everything longed for. In the meantime, though, you may have to look hard to find the life, and when you do spot it, it may not look like much. But that’s the way the kingdom of God is. Out of death and destruction, out of things that have been laid waste, comes new life and hope. It doesn’t come as fast as we’d like, it doesn’t come with the majesty we’d like. It is something that takes time, something that has to be tended and watered and nourished. But ultimately something beautiful and new can grow out of what once was. That is our hope and expectation.

Hope is a funny thing, though. I’m not sure we always know what hope really even is. For many of us, theologian Cynthia Campbell points out, hope is what we do only after all our planning and preparing is done. It’s what we do when we cannot fix whatever the problem is. But that’s not what Paul is talking about when he describes “hope.” For Paul, “hope” is really much more like “trust.” The ground for our hope is not the last resort, or random chance, or wishful, magical thinking. It’s not some pie-in-the-sky kind of optimism, nor is it a cheery, fixed-smile denial of the painful realities of life and death, injustice and suffering. Hope in scripture doesn’t deny the reality of struggle or suffering. Sr. Joan Chittester points out that difficulty and struggle is the crucible of hope, the process by which hope takes root in the soul. Hope in scripture is not hope *in spite of*

difficulty or danger. Hope in scripture looks at current realities and sees something very different. In scripture, the ground of our hope is *God*, the God of steadfastness and encouragement, the God of hope. Hope is a gift, a force that comes to us not from our own wishful thinking, but from the power of the Holy Spirit, who enters our human spirits and draws us in trust beyond today's darkness and toward the light of a new tomorrow.

We are encouraged when we are reminded of the marvelous things God has already done, and so we can live in confident hope that what God has said will be is what will be, because God has already proved to be trustworthy. As Cynthia Campbell says, "Biblical hope sees the present circumstance with the eyes of memory." We look at the present world, and we see it with the knowledge that our God loves this world with a fierce love, a love that transforms, a love that will not let things remain as they are, a love that wills a renewed world, a love that has always stepped in to create and redeem and make new, a love that brings life out of seeming death.

But then we hear that gospel lesson, with John the Baptizer's rant in which he calls those Pharisees and Sadducees vipers and deadwood, and this threat to chop them off at the roots, and to burn the dead wood and the chaff with unquenchable fire, and it sounds like a pretty scary threat. But there's another way to look at it. John seems to believe that even the folks he calls deadwood still have the hope of bearing fruit, still have the possibility of being transformed. But that transformation requires that the dead parts, just like my dead tree, be chopped away. Life is still there. But sometimes for life to be renewed and restored, we have to cut some things back to the stump so that new life can come out. Similarly, for grains of wheat to have the possibility of being useful, for bringing forth life, they need to be stripped of the useless, lifeless chaff that binds them.

Why are we so attached to our dead wood? Why are we so attached to the chaff in our lives? I think it's because we're so terribly afraid that if the dead wood is chopped away, if our chaff is blown away in the wind, that there might be nothing left. We lose sight of our hope. We lose sight of the source of life. We forget the promise of the world as it shall be, of our lives as they shall be. We fear that nothing new can come. But Christ calls us to trust. Christ calls us to being open to having the dead parts trimmed away so that something new can come. The very heart of Christ's teaching, the very heart of his life, is the message that life will always come surging out of death. "Unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it cannot bear fruit." It's scary, but it's true. John's call to us is less threat than it is clear-eyed knowledge of that spiritual principle that we must die to some things in order for life to burst forth. Sometimes we need stumps. And sometimes our chaff needs to be separated and burned up.

The season of Advent is a time to stop and assess what may need to be trimmed away in our lives. That can be profoundly disquieting. But this is also a season brimming with hope, filled with joyous expectation of what will be. We stop to notice, to look at our present circumstances with the eyes of memory, remembering that God has been faithful to us in the past, and trusting that God's dearest desire is to bring about a world where those who were once enemies will dine side by side in peace, where investment in war will give way to investment in wellbeing, a world where no one will hurt or destroy. We can trust that. We live in that hope as resurrection people who know that the dead and lifeless things in our lives, in our world, are not the ultimate reality, and that from even the things we thought were dead can spring forth life and healing. We have only to look at the stump, and see the shoot coming forth. This is God's doing.

Pray with me: Blessed are you, Lord God, the God of Israel! You alone do wondrous deeds. And blessed be your glorious name forever, and may all the earth be filled with your glory. We pray this, trusting in your faithfulness. Amen.