

Isaiah 11:1-10  
December 5, 2010

South Plains

### Good News for the Poor, the Meek, and the Young

When I look out my bedroom window toward the vegetable garden, I see the remains of an old black locust tree on the edge of our yard. It was cut down some years ago because it shaded the garden, and because we could already see signs of decay and rot. The remarkable feature of a locust is its ability to send up shoots, little locust trees, long after the main trunk has been cut down. Every summer, I clip or saw those shoots off the stump. If I wait too long into the growing season, they can be an inch or more in diameter. The locust refuses to die.

Isaiah says the kingdom of God on earth is like that locust stump. By the grace of God it keeps sending up new shoots. Whether the enemies of the kingdom attack from the outside or the kingdom decays from within, God keeps sending up shoots from that old stump. I like that image for the church. From a 2000 year old stump, often persecuted but more often suffering from decay, God keeps revitalizing new expressions of the body of Christ. In Isaiah's time, the people of God who represented the kingdom were in sad shape. They had followed all the denominational rules of Israel, crowning kings only from the line of King David. But, these rulers were mostly corrupt. They worshiped in the traditional ways in the traditional temple of Jerusalem, but with more

form than spirit. They boasted fine homes and large flocks of sheep, cattle and goats, but fewer and fewer people had more and more of the wealth while an expanding lower class grew homeless, jobless and without hope. The evidence of greedy materialism was everywhere except in the growing number of the needy.

Last week someone stole a red kettle from a Salvation Army bell-ringer in Charlottesville. For some of us these are uncertain times. For others, they are frightening times. For many, they are desperate times. Our society is stronger than Isaiah's nation, but we know many of the same problems. I am so glad that South Plains can help through our Cents-ability offerings for the hungry, through the food drive and Christmas gifts for Fluvanna County, and through our regular missions budget that provides assistance in many different ways.

As we prepare for the birth of Jesus, the readings from Isaiah and Matthew spell out the kind of Messiah God would provide in order to put his people back on track. Out of the stump of Jesse, the family of King David, a shoot would come, someone filled with the spirit of the Lord. This person would be a wise and powerful leader. He will not judge people by their appearance or by what others say about them. He will judge the poor with righteousness. Judgment goes against poor people whether it's the formal judgment of a court of law or the informal judgments we all make about people every day. If you can hire a good lawyer, you get better justice. If you speak well and dress nicely, as we are dressed

today, people judge you more favorably in stores and banks... and sometimes even in churches. The Messiah promised by Isaiah will look favorably on the poor and the meek; but the wicked will not stand. That's a promise and a threat we need to take seriously.

Indeed this shoot from the stump of Jesse will transform creation. On the Alligator River in North Carolina and in the Land Between the Lakes in Tennessee, the red wolf is making an assisted comeback. Cattle farmers in Virginia are not worried about wolves, but they do lose calves to coyotes. Out west, wolves and grizzly bears today threaten ranchers. But Isaiah's vision of the world tells us that wolves and mountain lions and bears will lie down together with lambs and cattle. In fact, children will play around poisonous snakes. They will not hurt or destroy.

Is that just pie in the sky, a dream on the order of Santa's toy shop in the North Pole, a painter's fantasy we abandon as we mature? Maybe not. Consider the amount of time and money we spend on our pets in America. Business Week says we spent \$41 billion last year, pampering everything from miniature dachshunds that curl up in bed with us to boa constrictors that curl around the shoulders of people braver than I am. Surely one reason we keep pets is to stay safely in touch with the wild side of nature. The peaceable kingdom of Edward Hicks' paintings is a dream we try to make real. It's real for me when our Labrador Retriever shows her magnificent, powerful teeth in a lazy yawn before resting

her head in my lap. We long for the peaceful bliss of Eden where all the savagery of the world turns into harmony and love.

We need to remember animals are only half of the story in Isaiah's vision. The other half involves setting to right those pesky human creatures. We don't keep human pets; we keep allies, spouses and friends. When we fail to keep these relationships we feel at least a twinge of guilt. We know deep in our hearts that something has gone wrong. Little children are especially sensitive to disruptions in the relationships close around them. We work hard to keep our circle of love whole and healthy.

The good news of Isaiah's prophecy and the great attraction of John the Baptist is that Christ's coming will restore our brokenness. Jesus, born in Bethlehem, can understand and judge rightly. He's already demonstrated that in his earthly life. The risen Christ will finally vindicate the power of his righteousness and love when he punishes the wicked, rescues the powerless, and refines all relationships after the example of the relations among Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

A shoot has come out of the stump of Jesse, a Savior. Isaiah opened a window on the future, a future rooted in the history of God's people and blooming in the risen life of God's Son. It is a future coming to pass in ways we can only dream of today, but it is coming. "And

the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea (Isaiah 11:9).”