

First Presbyterian Church
Rev. Pen Peery
December 16, 2012

Shoots and Stumps Isaiah 11:1-9

Our scripture for this day is from the book of the prophet Isaiah, but before I read it I want to acknowledge what took place on Friday morning at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut.

There are times when we are reminded that the world is a far cry from what God wants it to be. Without a doubt those who lost their lives in such a tragic manner are evidence of this fact.

Probably like many of you, I have spent the past two days watching a lot of news, reading commentary...trying to wrap my head around how this could have happened.

I left work early on Friday afternoon in order to meet my elementary school aged son when he got off the bus and when I hugged his neck I thought about the parents, and grandparents, and sisters and brothers whose lives were forever changed just a few hours before.

When the world feels like it is falling apart it is natural for us to ask a lot of questions.

I've heard many posed the past two days:

What could posses someone to be that indiscriminate about taking life?

Were there no warning signals?

How can we stop instable people from getting their hands on semiautomatic weapons?

When will we start taking mental illness seriously?

When will we take notice of the correlation between a culture that accommodates violence in television and video games and the increased number of real-world violent acts?

They are good questions.

All aimed at a desperate need to make sense out of an event that just doesn't make sense.

The Old Testament prophets lived in a world that no longer made sense.

It was a world beset by violence.

It was a broken world that condemned some people to poverty.

It was a world that had lost its zeal for and fear of the Lord.

A world rife with injustice.

Yet even amidst this world, the prophets held tightly to God's promise.
A promise that God would be faithful.
That the God we worship is one who acts within history to bring about
righteousness like a mighty stream.
That God is not satisfied with the world as we have rendered it.

The prophets were guided by God's promise –
They called that promise different things:
The Day of the Lord
The Kingdom of God
The Kingdom of the Heavens
The New Jerusalem

Before I read today's scripture I want us to notice the language that the prophet
Isaiah uses to describe such world.

It is the language of poetry.
Poetry.

Because sometimes, when the world we experience does not make sense and the
world for which we wait seems so far away, prose is inadequate...

And so we turn to methods of deeper communication – ways to move beyond the
limits of our common, every-day language – as we reach for the promise of a world
that will finally reflect the intention of the God who created it...who created us...and
who sent Jesus Christ to light our path.

Listen with me for the Word of God:

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A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,

and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall lie down with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters
cover the sea.

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They will not hurt or destroy.
The wolf will lie down with the lamb.
The calf and the lion and the fatling together.
And a little child shall lead them.

And before that –
A leader will be raised up whose faithfulness and justice make possible such
a world.
Whose delight is the fear of the Lord.
Who judges – not by what the eye sees or what the ear hears – but with
righteousness.

This grand vision – a vision that Isaiah describes in a poem – a vision of what we
have come to call the peaceable kingdom –
This vision it begins with a stump.

A stump.
The Hebrew word is geza.
It describes a mass from which nothing can grow.

Nothing.
Not hope. Or peace. Or Joy. Or Love.
Or possibility. Or a new normal. Or resurrection.

Isaiah's vision – his poem – about the peaceable kingdom begins with a stump.

*A shoot shall come up from the stump of Jesse
and a branch shall grow out of its roots.*

This is always the way God has acted within our history. Creating life out of death.
Bringing possibility out of impossibility.

In the beginning when the earth was a formless void and darkness and chaos
covered the face of the waters – God created the heavens and the earth.

Let there be light, God said.
And there was light.

And later, when the world had – once again – fallen back into darkness and chaos –
at the time when words were no longer enough – the eternal Word became flesh and
lived among us...

“what has come into being in him was life,” John writes. “And the life was the
light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not
overcome it.”

And when that Light was crucified, dead, and buried, God acted again.

It was on the first day of the week, just after dark, when the women came to
the tomb. They found the stone rolled back. They found the angels standing
before them: “why do you look for the living among the dead? He is not here.
He is risen.”

*A shoot shall rise from the stump of Jesse
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

As one who has the privilege of standing before you and proclaiming the good news
of Jesus Christ – I do not have the words to explain the evil that took place two days
ago. I do not know why this happened. But I know that when it did, God’s heart was
the first one to break.¹

The fact is, there are no words.
All explanations will fall short.
There aren’t enough people to blame.
And as much as we might need or want reassurances that this will never happen
again – we will not find any of them to be fully satisfactory.

So we must go beyond our words.
We must give ourselves over to the Source –

To the God who created the world and is still in the process of perfecting that
creation.

¹ With thanks to William Sloane Coffin.

The God who redeemed the world, and is still in the process of redemption.
The God who sustained the world, is – even here, even now – sustaining us.

To this God we belong – in life and in death – body and soul.
Be still and know.

This morning we are going beyond words. In lieu of a full sermon, our choir is sharing with us an offering of music.

They will be singing John Rutter's Gloria – based on the words that the angels sang in Luke's gospel to announce the coming of Jesus:

“Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among all people...”

As we are led by the choir in worship, I would encourage you to think of their offering...not as a concert, but as another form of proclamation.

A proclamation that lifts us beyond the limits of speech and into the realm of the Holy.

Where we can experience – not explain – the Good News: that, in all circumstances and through all the ages, our God in Jesus Christ is a God of mercy, and forgiveness, and love, and always...always...a God of hope.

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