

Tough Ax to Follow  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sun. of Advent (8Dec19)  
Is11:1-10; Ps72:1-7,18-19; Matt3:1-12

Let's think about trees.

We've got the benefit of a visual aid. Earlier in the week, I was trying to figure out how you could rotate your chairs and get to stare out the windows. But then conveniently the great group of decorators Tuesday evening established the visual aid for you with scarcely a craning of the neck muscles.



And so what do you notice with these trees? Or what do they cause you to think of? I'll give you a moment to reflect, then would be eager to hear and have you share.

Trees usually make us think of life, not least because we even have Bible stories featuring the "tree of life." We picture growth, and hold them as an abode for creatures, a shelter for not only these red cardinals but squirrels and grubs and mosses and more. With this reason, the kingdom

of God is even portrayed as a tree, harboring us all. It's sort of like a family tree, realizing we branch in various directions and progress or digress from each other, but are all still held together.

We conceive of trees as steadfast, for past and future, changing only slowly with small growth rings marking years and decades, like the "good oak" Aldo Leopold and his chief sawyer spouse cut down, and deeper rings to centuries or even millennia, like 5000 year-old bristlecone pines. That firm, unbending, solid presence and tough trunk calls to mind Psalm 1 and the tune "like a tree planted by the water, we shall not be moved."

But about such solid strength, I also heard that inside the Biosphere 2, a closed dome system in Arizona meant to replicate Earth's environments, the trees weren't replicating. The trees had to be propped up with posts. It turns out that without air movement and wind pushing against the trees, they don't learn to stand firm. Of course it's not a surprise that creatures adapt to and respond with their natural environment, that no tree is an island. But it is a reminder of rugged resiliency as a benefit, that calm, quiet isolation isn't necessarily best.

Another for odd ironies and paradoxes: we use evergreens at this time of year as a symbol of eternal life (paired with the circle of the Advent wreath as another unending symbol), but these nice wispy pines turn out to be very limited life as we've cut them down and they're drying out and before too very long will be tossed out.

It happens again at Easter when we have blooming flowers with the fragrance of new life (and usually an early glimpse before they're ready to bud outdoors), but those bright colors quickly wither, and—zip—there goes the sense of new life. Easter's eternal freshness lasts not quite a week.

I guess that means there's always a theological yes and no to symbols. Anything we use to represent God or faith is inadequate and incomplete. And it reminds us we can read from God toward nature, seeing in the world signs of

the God we know, but it's much more difficult to extrapolate from nature to God.

So today we've got the image of a stump, of a tree cut down, even of an ax lying at the root of the tree. We're actually, then, reflecting less on the tree of life than the tree of death.

For trees cut down, we've already seen they might be trying to indicate eternal life, even if it's in a temporary or momentary way. These evergreens are intended not only to be beautiful and to invite creation to worship with us, but also make us recall even in the cold of winter that life persists, a marker from God, too.

Then we've got this big trunk chunk *up in front here*. This came from the crabapple tree, formerly outside the upper entrance. It might be a marker for us of gratitude or grief, the tree having provided our best kid playground around. It is also a marker of disease, of things not going right, of the rot that was splitting it apart and resulted in Jim Muehl's chainsaw being applied to it.

That may be similar to *this* dead remnant of the Burr Oak tree that Lindy Wilson preserved. It was included in our All Saints service, remembering those who had died and whose legacy has shaped us. It is a memorial. Other parts of that Burr Oak wood have been crafted and reshaped around church to serve other purposes; this knotty unearthed remainder just testifies to former life.

While we're thinking of stumps, I have in mind these days those in arid Palestine. On the trip, we heard plenty about people cut off from their trees. I'm not sure if any of the rest of the group noticed, because one set went by in the bus I didn't get to point it out, but there is a heart-wrenching scene of a grove of olive trees wiped out.



Barren clear-cuts are always a sad and desperate view, I'd say. But these tend to be ancient groves, farmed by the same family for hundreds of years, part of their livelihood and certainly their identity and culture. From Palestinian families, the Israeli military comes in and saws them all off to stumps. They say, again and ever that it's about security, because somebody could hide in those trees, but it really seems about pestering persecution. Those remnant olive tree stumps are meant as markers to convey power and powerlessness, about who has potential.

That's still not exactly our Bible reading, with the cut down stump. It would seem to stump the future itself. (It wouldn't be worthwhile to have a sermon like this if there weren't any puns. Where would the tree-t be in that? Okay...now I'll leaf you alone. Except to point out the sermon title.)

Anyway! In the words of the prophet Isaiah, the stump is an alleged symbol of lifelessness awaiting a surprise. It is called the stump of Jesse. Jesse was King David's father. David was the highpoint of the Hebrew kingdom in ancient Palestine. The most power. The most territory. Then things quickly fell apart. This is saying that the family tree has been cut off. There won't be more branches. It won't continue to extend and reach to the heavens. By this time of Isaiah a couple hundred years after David, it was pretty bleak. The mighty tree had been hacked away at by enemies. It was no longer flourishing and maybe even seemed like its life was over.

But Isaiah sees a shoot, a tender leaf coming up from the lopped off stump. It may not yet look like the verdant foliage stretching out, but it

comes from the same source, the same stock, right out of the stump. The life of David's kingdom may make a comeback. So in that case, the tree that seemed dead was only *mostly* dead.

That contrasts rather strongly with the image from John the Baptist. It doesn't seem to hold out much hope it's only dormant, that after a bare season things may green up again. For John, it's not oppression or persecution or enemies that have done the pruning and slashing, but God. God's will was to get rid of that tree. What's chopped off is thrown into the fire. Not much apparent life left there.

But that's maybe the clearest place where our symbols don't line up with the reality of faith. For these wispy pines, for the logs up here, for what we may get to sprout or leaf and live again, if we pitched any of these slabs of dead wood into the fire, that would be the end.

Yet even when cut down, thrown in fire, God pulls out from death, out from destruction new life. The ashes of our past are not representative of what awaits us to come. Ashes to ashes? Not for God. Not just from decrepit stumps, but even from a burned up pile of soot, God can breathe in the breath of new life, raising from the dead.

That is the promise of baptism. You are a tree planted by the water. In the water. Not just when things look good and life is green and abundant. Even when you're withering and wondering, still comes the promise of life, of breath, of wind to reinforce and sustain, to kindle not just purging fires but the living fire of life. You are a burning bush. You hold the promise spoken in baptism from the prophet Isaiah, that God's Spirit rests on you, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord, the Spirit of joy in God's presence now and forever.

Since we started with a pause, let's end with one, too.

As a tree of the Lord, what do you expect of growth?

What do you wish were pruned away, purged, burned off?

Where are the areas that feel like life's goodness has been carved and whittled away?

What are the memorials of old growth?

Where are signs of hope?

And what is new life, even beyond expectation?