

## Stumps and Shoots “O the Mystery of God’s Dwelling – in our relationships”

Sheldon Swartz – December 8, 2013



There are many more attractive ways to begin the message this morning than with a stump, but that’s what we’ve got to start with. A big old stump that looks like its life is over. What’s the stump? The context here is that of the 10 northern tribes of Israel falling to the Assyrian Empire, which was the world’s only superpower of the time. Isaiah sees this as part of the judgment of God against Israel because of Israel’s unfaithfulness in serving foreign gods and refusing to address the socio economic ills that resulted in the poor being oppressed. In the first 10 chapters of Isaiah we see that his strong words calling for repentance went unheeded with the resulting destruction.

So the stump represents something that had been strong and flourishing under the house of David being brought down to nothing. Isaiah had predicted that the Davidic dynasty would be completely cut off, so that all that remained is the stump of its family tree, the house of Jesse. Israel went from a dynamic force under the house of David to nothing, subject to the powers around them. And Isaiah clearly sees this being the result of Israel’s unfaithfulness and refusal to trust God and order their lives accordingly.

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Stories about what it's like to have it all and then lose it. What is it like to "have it all", to be on track, to have confidence that one is blessed by God, and then, for whatever reason lose it all? We know that we experience losses in our own lives and communities and countries and worldwide when self-centeredness and self-sufficiency and either the need for more power or the fear of losing it begin to rule and when we forget where we came from, who we really are in the world, and what it means to trust God. That is the route to destruction. Evil can never triumph for long. It always has within it the seeds of destruction.

We also know that we can experience catastrophic loss and it have nothing to do with having forgotten God. That those losses and destruction, such as school shootings, natural catastrophes, loss of one's business or source of income, tragic deaths of loved ones, living in a place where one is persecuted because of one's faith, losses of dreams and aspirations, loss of significant relationships through unresolved conflict, come upon us in the midst of living a life of trust in God. Trust in and faithfulness to God does not make us immune to experiences in our lives that may feel to us like our lives are being cut down to a stump, where nothing is left.

But, while so much of Isaiah's prophecy has to do with warnings and predictions of destruction because of Israel's unfaithfulness, it is never the final word. Leaking through the devastation Isaiah also gives up some wonderful pictures of hope, this passage from Is 11 being one of them. We are privileged to visualize and join in with the hope depicted in this passage.



Out of the stump, *out of the stump* (not a beautiful new tree) emerges signs of life. From deep within, out of the roots, a Branch emerges that bears fruit. In this instance it is the vision of Messianic rule that Isaiah calls his listeners to find hope in. This is a vision of the Messiah, the prince of peace referred to in chapter 9, that would grow up with the Spirit of the Lord resting on Him and through the power of his word he would make things right in relationships that were wrong. He could do that because He would see beyond what appeared visible – v. 4b “He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear;” In other words he would see beyond what is visible and heard on the surface and he would act out of his own inner rightness of heart, to bring hope to the poor and powerless of the earth. And the power would be through his *words*, not physical force. And that power would be that of righteousness and faithfulness, not the need to control or dominate. And in some strange and beautiful way, this way would become dominant and would lead to all nations being blessed.

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And then we have some of the most unlikely, yet beautiful pictures of what the Kingdom of God looks like under the rule of this Branch, this Person, that has emerged out of what appeared dead. It's a picture of the power of the Messiah, who we know as Jesus Christ, to bring about on the earth what the earth longs for – peace, harmony, where the powerful and the weak are working together, where the powerful and the powerless are on the same side.



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Painted by Edward Hicks, called The Peaceable Kingdom Read 6-9

The wolf shall live 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.  
<sup>7</sup> The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
<sup>8</sup> The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
<sup>9</sup> 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.

It's a picture of when the dangerous and the vulnerable don't know they aren't on the same side. Where the powerless and weak don't realize that they have enemies, whether that is in the natural world, in the world of human relationships, in the world of nations. It is a picture of relational harmony, where things are as they ought to be, where everyone is for the other.

Is this just a dream? Is this just fantasy, a way of escaping from the real world? Is this something about which we say, cynically, "Well, that will never happen!" Or is this something that this Branch, whom the fullness of which we believe is Jesus Christ, means for us to always believe in, to never give up hope for, to always seek to see where and how that kind of kingdom can be and is present now, in this world, where we live, and that we are a part of it coming. When He came to this earth he said his kingdom is at hand, now. Not, just it will come, but it is now, it is within you, it is among you, now. It is still true. What are the seeds in you, the shoots in you, in us, that are the fruit of our faith in Jesus Christ and His Spirit, perhaps emerging from hardship, that carry the power of the living God to transform your world, now?

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I have enjoyed reading some of Christoph Fredrich Blumhardt's writings. He was the founder of the Bruderhof, an international communal movement of families and single men and women who seek to put into action Christ's command to love God and neighbor

He says, "Where shall God be revealed? On earth. Not in heaven. He does not need you there where there are already plenty of angels to honor him. Your place is on earth! This is the salvation the angels long to observe.

He says, "Those intent on Christ's coming have to bring a different way into their situations."

He goes on to say, "Need and misery will not be overcome until the barriers between eternity and this world are broken through again. An opening must be made from above downward, not from below upward. We Christians would rather find an opening out of this world. We only want to fly up and out of this world, as doves fly into the sky, and be saved. According to the Bible, however, the openings must be broken through from above in order that help can fly down to our earth."

If we look at the life of the One whom we believe most clearly demonstrates the coming of God's kingdom on earth; if we look at how he related to people and situations as he encountered them, we notice that he (I can almost say never) responded to people and

situations as those around him expected. His responses almost always seemed to come from another place - unfortunately, almost a foreign place. Why? It wasn't because he was smarter than all of them. It was because He was in close communion with God. He brought the new into his interactions. He re-created ways of relating – I think it was his recreation!

And so, in this season, as we celebrate the coming of our Messiah, our Savior, our Lord, our Guide into this world, what is the mystery of His dwelling in relationships? And can we be open to newness, to freshness, to Spirit-led creativity as we seek to allow the Christ within us to make us more as He is in this world? Will we be open to the ways that God can use us to bring hope for wholeness, for reconciliation, for harmony in this world? And will we repent of that which blocks it?

### **Slide “where do you long for restored relationship?”**

Where do you see the gap? How are you living in the gap? Missionary Don Richardson served for many years among the primitive tribes in Papua New Guinea and wrote a book entitled “The Peace Child” in which he describes his search to find words to express how Jesus Christ came to give His life that we might have peace with God. He relates how he finally found the answer in the culture of the native people themselves.

He tells the story of two tribes in Papua New Guinea who maintained a blood feud between themselves for several generations. Each generation fought and nursed their wounds only to fight again killing and maiming more and more people. Finally after years of violence the two tribes realized that they must stop the violence or nothing would be left of their peoples. But what could they do to end years of warring between the two tribes and to begin to trust each other? Richardson goes on to tell how the chiefs of the two tribes came together and brought with them a child they called “the Peace Child”. This child was the son of one of the opposing chiefs which was then adopted into the family of the other chief. As long as that child lived the two chiefs promised to cease their fighting so that all could live. And that became the image of what Jesus came to do for all people.

### **Slide “what is your “Peace child?”**

What do have to offer that brings peace in your world?

Another story of how our lives can be transformed by God's peace is found in the life of Archbishop of the Chicago diocese, Joseph Cardinal Bernardin. In his little book, The Gift of Peace there is an account of his meeting with Steven Cook, the young man who had

accused the Cardinal of sexual abuse. In 1993, the accusation became public, and Cardinal Bernardin had to live in the glare of public curiosity, constant media attention and the deep pain of experiencing his credibility and integrity questioned by many people who simply assume that an accusation is the equivalent of guilt. Over time, Mr. Cook acknowledged that the charges were false and the case was dropped. The Cardinal plunged back into his busy schedule but he kept thinking about Steven Cook, his accuser, now critically ill with AIDS, living alone.

So Bernardin did something. He located Cook and invited him to meet at a seminary outside Philadelphia. The Cardinal explained that his only reason for wanting to see him was to tell him that he harbored no ill feelings towards him. He wanted to pray with him.

Steven Cook accepted that invitation and said that he wanted to apologize for the hurt and embarrassment he had caused. When the meeting happened, Cook told his story, including his alienation from the church. After they had talked for awhile, the cardinal said what he had come to say, and he gave Mr. Cook an inscribed Bible and offered to celebrate Mass. Mr. Cook hesitated at first. But Cardinal Bernardin took a 100-year-old chalice out of his case. "Steven, this is a gift from a man I don't even know. He asked me to use it to celebrate Mass with you some day." Steven responded tearfully, "Please, let's celebrate Mass now." Afterward, Steven Cook said, "A big burden has been lifted from me today. I feel healed and very much at peace."

### **Next slide**

What is your peace child? What is your chalice? What might the Spirit of God inspire in you that becomes the means by which that is which is set against the other – whether it is individuals, groups, relationship with the natural world, nations – discover the way to reconciliation, to peace? Will you, will we, recognize and join in with the work of God's spirit in the world to bring this about? Where the weak and vulnerable, the defenseless and powerless, lay at peace in the presence of that which is strong and powerful? Paul picks up on the Spirit of Jesus in the passage in Romans read earlier in the service where he says "We who are strong ought to bear with the failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor."



On this slide we see the lamb lying with the lion, a picture of the weak and vulnerable in a place of safety with the strong and powerful. It's interesting that Jesus is referred to as both of these in Scripture – Lion of Judah and Lamb of God. The weakness and vulnerability of God resting in the strength and power of God.

In closing today, I'm inviting you to participate in a simple little exercise of peacemaking. Let your left hand represent that which is powerful (person, group, nation) and your right hand represent that which is vulnerable (person, group, nation, the earth). Hold them apart, and then bring them together, allowing your right hand to rest in your left hand (as the lamb lays with the lion). Pray

"Jesus Christ, have mercy, and bring peace."

"Where possible, use me." Leave up for a minute or so.

May your Kingdom come more fully. That is our prayer. May it be so.