

A Hidden Hope
Isaiah 11:1-4,
Matthew 1:1-6, 17,

We are now living in an extreme economic depression, with fear and hopelessness for what tomorrow may bring. Last month, 530,000 people lost their jobs in the US, and many more are in fear of being laid off. We are currently facing an economic catastrophe. But we are also in the Advent season, when expect and hope for the Messiah, who will bring the Kingdom of God into the world.

In Isaiah's day – in Judea around 750 BC – the situation was even more desperate than today. The northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, and the people had fallen into deep despair. In that political climate, Isaiah prophesied, "The judgment of God will come." Isaiah foresaw the Day of Yahweh as a day of judgment, when Israel would be destroyed by the wrath of God. That was certainly not good news for the people of Israel. Furthermore, Isaiah viewed the Assyrians as the instrument of God's judgment. That was not good news to the King of Israel.

As a man of God, however, Isaiah also prophesied that the Messiah -- "God with us" -- will come after the judgment. This righteous king would be a Hiding Place from the tempest, a Stream in the desert, and a great shade-giving Rock in a weary land. This is the message for us also in our situation today.

Isaiah sees the Messiah as a Shoot from the stem of Jesse and a Branch from Jesse's family roots. He grows as a young sapling with new strength, achieving life out of death. Our Lord sprang not only from the line of King David, but more significantly, from a ruined and sinful humanity. He became a Tree of Life for Earth's dying millions and the founder of a new humanity.

Isaiah saw his nation crumbling from within, plunged into ruin, and reduced to a tiny remnant. He saw that even that small remnant would be plunged into catastrophe. However, Isaiah firmly believed that Yahweh was in control of events, and that His purpose was to establish a kingly rule of peace. He believed that God would bring forth from the tragedy a chastened and purified remnant of His people. He therefore saw the present tragedy as a part of God's overall purpose.

This image of a shoot and branch from Jesse's family roots is closely related to the idea of a remnant in the Old Testament. A remnant is what is left of a community after it undergoes a catastrophe. The term – remnant -- is most often used in reference to the Israelites. The idea of a remnant is positive. No matter how big the catastrophe, a remnant survives and renews the community. If a catastrophe reflects God's judgment, then the surviving remnant is evidence of God's mercy.

The remnant is seen in the flood story in Genesis. In that story, the flood is God's judgment on human wickedness, to "blot out...man and beast and creeping things and

birds of the air.” However, not all living things are destroyed in the flood. A righteous man, Noah, is saved, along with his household, and the animals in his ark. After the flood, they are the remaining remnant, and are able to repopulate the Earth.

We see the remnant again in the Joseph story. In that story, the catastrophe is a famine, which threatens the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. Joseph, a member of that family, is able to preserve the family line. When Joseph reveals himself to his brothers, he says, “God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on Earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors.”

Again, Isaiah 11:1 shows us a picture of a remnant of God. "And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."

In Isaiah's eyes, the nation of Israel is a tree: its roots are the patriarchs, and individual Israelites are its branches. In the history of Israel, God cut off the branches of its kingdom completely when the Israelites betrayed and disobeyed God's will. After that, Israel remained as roots with no branches. There was no hope in the tree of Israel at the time of Isaiah. But Isaiah saw a new vision for the future, as a stem of Jesse, a branch that would grow out of his roots.

How does Isaiah's image of the shoot and branch apply to our lives today? I would like to share with you three reflections on this image of Christ for the Advent season:

First, there is hope in your remnants.

Moses ran away from the Pharaoh's wrath to an unknown foreign land, Midian. He lost everything he had before: prestige, power, wealth and his relationships in Egypt. He became a nomad who cared for the flock of Jethro, his father-in-law. One day, Moses found a burning bush in Mt. Horeb while he was tending the flock, and he heard the voice of God calling to him. And God told him: "Go now. I am sending you to Pharaoh to bring my people the Israelites out of Egypt." But Moses replied, "I am nobody. Nobody will listen to me." God said to him, "What is that in your hand?" "A staff," he replied. The God said, "Throw it on the ground." Moses threw it on the ground and it became a snake, and he ran from it.

Then God said to him, "Reach out your hand and take it by the tail." So Moses reached out and took hold of the snake and it turned back into a staff in his hand.

What did Moses have in his hand? It was a staff. It was a nothing but a stick, but it became the leading staff of the Israelites when God was with him.

We lost many things but we have remnants in our hands. When we use this little that is left over according to God's will, it will become treasure.

One day, three-year-old Dawson hurt himself while playing "ghost" in his room. He had put a sheet over his head, tripped on the sheet, fell, and hit his head on the corner of a

table. He had to have five stitches in the center of his forehead. As they waited for the doctor in the emergency waiting room, Dawson was not happy. His head hurt and he knew the doctor was going to do something unpleasant. But then he suddenly smiled when he heard from doctor,

"Dawson, do you want to be like Harry Potter?"

"Yeah."

"OK, Dawson! Don't be afraid of what I'm going to do. I'm going to make you a Harry Potter scar on your forehead."

Dawson was very pleased.

"Mom and Dad, guess what? I'm going to get a Harry Potter scar!" he exclaimed to his parents.

Well, not many of us will get a Harry Potter scar in the center of our foreheads, but according to the Bible we can have something much better. God's judgment, which may be painful, will lead us to the coming of the Messiah.

Second, do not be discouraged or encouraged by mere numbers.

Numbers are an illusion. They are not the substance of hope. The Bible says, "Faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen." Don't be deceived by numbers around you: your age, your income, attendance, scores, grades. They are just numbers, and will not affect you. Don't be bounded by numbers. To be rich or poor is not according to numbers, but according to ability. If you are able to do something do it, and use your ability, or lose it.

Andrew Carnegie, the multimillionaire, sat a dining room in a fancy hotel. He had a place of food in front of him, but it was untouched. His health was failing and his appetite was gone. He looked out of a window and saw a working man sitting on the curbside, heartily enjoying his lunch. Carnegie exclaimed: "I'd give a million dollars to have an appetite like that man!"

One million dollars is just another number. It is an illusion. It is subordinate to health, which is necessary to live. Our daily bread is enough for today for our basic needs. Our goal, however, is bigger than this basic need. The Kingdom of God and His will is the ultimate goal that we are hoping for.

And lastly, let's celebrate Today's Christmas.

In theological terms, there are three Christmases. The first Christmas occurred 2000 years ago in city of Bethlehem. We remember that first Christmas even now.

The second Christmas is His second coming, the Christmas to come. We will celebrate when Christ returns as the ruler of the last judgment. That is the Eschatologic, the final

day of this world, Christmas. We anticipate the return of Christ the King in His Second Advent.

In between these two Christmases, there is a third Christmas, which is today's Christmas. I interpret the third Christmas as: the Emmanuel Christmas, the Existential Christmas, when we worship Christ who is among us here and now.

When the disciples are caught in a storm out on the Sea of Galilee, being "battered by the waves, for the wind was against them" they experience Christmas on the sea. Christ comes to them in an incredible way, by "walking on the sea"! Isn't it fascinating that the presence of Christ is most visible and most welcome when we are caught in a storm?

It is a miracle story. It deals with the frustration and helplessness we sometimes feel. It deals with the hard struggles of life. It deals with the flood of problems that can rush in on us. But it also reminds us that in the difficult moments – in the storms of life – Christ comes to us in powerful ways, bringing help and strength, peace and poise, confidence and victory.

One Sunday morning, a pastor arrives at church with a Band-aid on his face.

Member: Pastor, how did you get that cut on your face?

Pastor: I was thinking about my sermon while shaving this morning, and cut myself.

Member: That's too bad! Next time you'd better concentrate on your shaving and cut your sermon!

You don't need to worry about me. I use an electric shaver, so I can't cut my face and I won't cut my sermon. And don't cut your giving. Those are terrible mistakes.

I am thinking about cutting my living expenses. I told my wife "don't even think about Christmas gift for the family this year. Rather, save and help somebody who nearby who needs our help. That is the meaning of Christmas."

I used to fast for three days every month until I came here to Cheyenne. I'm going to start fasting again, one day a week, for prayer and help for those who need meals.

In the past few weeks I have had telephone calls asking for help -- for utility assistance and transportation expenses. I couldn't help them. We will probably be contacted more frequently by those who are in desperate need. We have got to share their pain, fear, and despair in the name of Christ our Lord.

The coming of Jesus, King of Judea, is good news to the people, but bad news to King Herod who controls the people. Christ is the hidden hope among those who are in despair under King Herod. The Church is the agent of hidden hope among those who don't know what real care is. Christmas is the time of sharing our hope for Christ among us.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. Engraft your life into Christ tree on today's Christmas, your life will bear eternal fruits; fruit of joy, of peace, of grace, of faith, of hope ,of love and of blessing.