



**Grace Lutheran Church, State College, PA**

**Rev. Scott E. Schul**

**2nd Sunday of Advent: December 8, 2019**

**Sermon Title: "Stump"**

**Sermon Text: Isaiah 11:1-10**

*The stump was lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.* If you've read the first ten chapters of the Book of Isaiah, the stump's fate was no surprise at all. It was plain for anyone to see. It was coming. The warnings were everywhere. The prophet tried his best to awaken the people so they could avoid this fate, but I think even he knew that he was only alerting them to their inevitable outcome. He knew their heart and their stubbornness. He knew their addiction to idolatry, greed, selfishness, materialism, and sin. He knew their arrogance, impatience, and faithlessness. And if the *prophet* knew, surely *God* knew.

*And so it was no shock at all when at last the stump was lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.* That stump had once been the House of David – a powerful *family* that had ruled Israel for generations. But the stump had also been the *people* of Israel. They were *God's* people, a thriving tree that soared above the other nations, with branches that were strong and powerful. But the tree had become diseased, dangerous, and corrupted. It would have to come down. And so, just as the prophet Isaiah promised, an ax in the form of the armies of Assyria was on its way. The trunk would be chopped to the ground. The leaves would be scattered. The wood would be burned.

*And all that would be left was a stump... lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.* The beginning chapters of Isaiah tell of the death of a nation, a kingdom, and a people. The story is so vast and painful that it's hard for us to fully comprehend it. The invasion of the country, the death of thousands, the destruction of governmental and religious institutions, the separation of families and the forced march of entire elements of a people into exile, thousands of miles away, is simply so far beyond our experience that we can't relate to it. The story seems to have absolutely nothing to do with us. And so we're tempted to skip over it to less challenging parts of the Bible.

But Isaiah took this horrifying saga and boiled it down to an unforgettable and understandable image. Just picture a tall tree that's been axed and chopped into an insignificant stump. Nothing but a stump... lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.

What are the stumps in *our* lives? What big beautiful thing has come crashing down *around* us, *on* us or maybe even *within* us? Some of our stumps come early in life. Though they are small, they *do* manage to leave their mark on us. It's the sports team we failed to make because we just didn't practice enough. And it's the test in school we didn't bother to study for

because we thought we had it under control and instead ended up flunking. These little failures become stumps in our lives.

As we grow older, stumps of various sizes begin to multiply around us. It's the thoughtless word we spoke, the birthday we forgot, or the friendship or even marriage that, over time, grew stale and lifeless from neglect and self-centeredness. These are the stumps in our lives.

Other stumps arise from job losses or lost promotions because we didn't give our best... health problems because we didn't exercise or take care of ourselves... and a host of missed opportunities because we took our eye off the ball. We got distracted. Maybe we got lazy. Or perhaps we tried to bite off more than we could chew. Whatever the cause, something very much alive died. All that's left is a stump, and we ache with regret.

But the stump in the Book of Isaiah – the stump that once was the proud House of David and the mighty People of Israel – *that* stump resulted from faith that had grown icy cold, attitudes that had become rebellious, a religion that had become mere words, and a lifestyle that was devoted to all manner of false gods. It was their rejection of God that ultimately led to their downfall. The last gasps of their faith left nothing but a stump... lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.

Has your faith become a stump? Do you remember, as a child, how eager you were to hear the stories about Jesus? Do you recall how you couldn't wait to go to Sunday School, and how you expectantly folded your hands and prayed over meals with your family? Do you remember the joy you felt when you took your first communion, and the excitement of receiving your very first Bible? And do you recall your sadness when you first learned about Jesus's death on Good Friday, and your astonishment when you discovered the Easter resurrection?

There was a time when your faith was *strong*, when it was *innocent*, and when it was *trusting*. But other interests and priorities gradually took center stage. Slowly but steadily, the soaring tree of faith around which your life was structured became corrupted and unsteady. The world chopped away at its trunk. Indifference and disregard ate away at its roots. And sin weakened it like a disease. The tree came crashing down and all that was left was a stump. Other stumps quickly followed in its wake. As far as you can see, nothing but stumps... lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead. Just like God said it would be.

But as we heard today in our reading from Isaiah, something quite unexpected happened to Israel's stump. The prophet foretold that a shoot would come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch would grow out of its roots. In other words, through God's grace and love, *new* life would spring from a *dead* place! From the dead stump of the House of David, a new King would arise – a King clothed in righteousness, wisdom and understanding who would bring peace, forgiveness, and mercy. From that dead stump, new life would pour forth that would bless the people of Israel and all of creation. That shoot of new life reaches out even to us. That shoot... that branch... that King... is none other than Jesus Christ.

Friends, the time of waiting, anticipation and preparation that marks the season of Advent is a time for us to honestly acknowledge the many ugly stumps that pockmark the landscape of our lives, including the stump of our discipleship. But Advent is also a time to recognize that Jesus Christ came to this earth nearly 2,000 years ago. Jesus Christ continues to come to us through Word and Sacrament. And Jesus Christ will come again.

And so we are not condemned to forever live in despair, because in each of his advents into our world Jesus Christ brings a fresh, green shoot from the stump of our lives and a strong, fruit bearing branch from our roots. Jesus Christ is bringing *life* from that which was *dead*. In him there is *hope*. In him there is a *new beginning*. In him there is an opportunity to *recapture* what was lost and to *build* something new and even better.

We can turn from our mistakes. We can overcome our failures. We can be reconciled, renewed, refreshed, and reinvigorated in our faith and refilled with joy because somewhere in our life a stump... lifeless... quiet... still... motionless... dead... is coming alive through the grace and love of Jesus Christ. If you can't see it now, pray for eyes to see and ears to hear.

Because Christ *is* with us, bringing forth new life in dead places, bringing hope to the hopeless, and gently drawing us – his children – back to the warmth and safety of his loving arms. This Advent, may you be filled with joy in the new creation Christ is bringing forth in *you* and in his *Church*. This I pray in Jesus name. Amen.