Isaiah 11:1-11; Matthew 3:1-12

**Second Sunday of Advent; December 4, 2016**

**Caroline M. Kelly**

I’m not a big fan of winter. I’ve adjusted to the colder temperatures since we moved here four years ago, but I’m as impatient as ever when it comes to the arrival of spring. For me, there’s nothing more hopeful and energizing than the signs of daffodil and crocus pushing up out of the cold, hard ground; the green shoots, still fragile but tenacious, signaling the beginning of new life. After the cold, dark barren days of winter, the coming of spring always seems like a miracle. For me, it can never come too soon.

In this week’s Old Testament reading, Isaiah describes the coming of the Messiah much like the coming of spring, using the image of a shoot growing up out of a tree stump. Speaking to a people who were living through their own kind of long winter, Isaiah uses this wonderful image to offer them hope for their future.

God had promised their most revered king, David, that he would be a great king and that his descendents would reign over Israel forever. God had also promised to provide a home for the people of Israel where they would always leave in peace.

But the descendents of David did not live up to their end of the bargain and ultimately, David’s kingdom was divided by internal conflict and later conquered by Israel’s enemies. Some people immigrated to other countries and some were forcibly moved to Babylon. A long period of winter followed, during which the people of Israel wondered whether God had abandoned them and what their future might hold.

Maybe there are places in your life where you wonder what the future will hold. Maybe you’ve lost a loved one this year. Your relationship with a sister or a brother is strained. You’ve recently retired after many years and you’re lost without a daily routine. Your health keeps you from doing the things you used to enjoy. You’re tired of working so hard just to make ends meet.

Where are you waiting for new life to appear?

Like the winter for me, the season of Advent is a time of waiting for the church. It’s a time to be listening, watching and waiting for the coming of God into our lives and into our hearts. We are not left to wait without hope. Like the coming of spring, God’s promises can be trusted.

In today’s reading, Isaiah offers the hope of new life, describing the one whom God will sending, the ideal ruler, who will establish justice for all people, especially the most vulnerable. And peace shall overtake the world so that even the violence in creation will be no more. Predator and prey will live together and a little child will lead them around like pets.

In Matthew’s gospel, John the Baptist is also preparing the people for new life. He, like Isaiah, draws on the image of a tree as he calls the people to change their ways. “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”[[1]](#footnote-1)

Israel’s monarchy is like a tree, cut down for its failure to extend justice to the poor and the needy, the downtrodden, widows, orphans and aliens. It is no more than a stump.

Usually stumps mark an ending. But in this case, God is not willing to let it go. Instead, God will go back to the same family that produced the former kings of Israel, this dead stump, and cause “a shoot to come out of it, a branch to grow from its roots.”[[2]](#footnote-2)

It’s an amazing vision of faithfulness. Surely, God could raise up a ruler from better stock, but God chooses instead to honor God’s promise to establish a just and peaceful world through the House of David, now just a dead tree.

For the Israelites, during their winter, Isaiah’s vision kept them going, kept their waiting, not in vain, but expectantly, knowing that God would intervene in their lives when spring came.

This, too, is where our hope lies, in this God who never gives up on us, who brings new life out of death, who promises that spring will indeed come after a long winter.

In places like war-torn Syria and Iraq, the people are also waiting for spring after a long, hard winter. In the meantime, trusting that it will come, the remaining Presbyterian congregations there

are embodying hope to thousands of families who have been displaced from their homes by the awful fighting of the past nearly five years. Located throughout Syria, including in some of the most battered and isolated communities, these congregations continue to open their doors and hearts to those who have even less than they do.[[3]](#footnote-3)

In the city of Aleppo in Syria, the pastor of the Presbyterian Church has chosen to remain there with his family, determined to continue their life-giving ministry in a place where death is far too familiar and where hope for the future has all but been extinguished.

The Rev. Elmarie Parker serves as the Regional Liaison from the Presbyterian Church (USA) to the Presbyterians in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. Of her experience there, she writes:

... I have the privilege of working side-by-side with brothers and sisters who face almost insurmountable obstacles with a trusting and persevering reliance on what God will and does provide. I’m learning what it looks like to live as Christ’s light even in the midst of questions and fears … to live as hope incarnated to those who have lost all hope. Perhaps most importantly, I am learning that the church can do this not from a position of strength and wealth, but from a position of weakness and poverty, trusting that Christ is enough, trusting that Christ will have the final word no matter how dark it may appear.[[4]](#footnote-4)

Like the shoot that comes forth from the stump, Syrian Christians have become that sign of life for their neighbors, fragile but tenacious; a light in the darkness; hope where there is despair.

During this season, even as we wait, how can we be a sign of life for our neighbors without hope? How can we be a light in the darkness? How can we embody that tenacious new growth from an old stump?

Later in the service, we will remember and give thanks for the one who gives us our greatest strength and hope this season. At this table, we will tell the stories of what God has done for us:

how God created life out of nothingness;

how God became life for us in Jesus;

how God’s Spirit is with us now,

even as we await the fulfillment of our greatest longing –

for God’s reign on earth,

where peace shall so overcome the world

that wild animals will live together,

and even a child will be safe in the midst of them.

Spring is coming friends. It is coming: fragile, but tenacious indeed!

Thanks be to God!

1. Matthew 3:10 (NRSV). [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Isaiah 10: [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. The Rev. Elmarie Parker, “Hope Incarnated: The Church in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon,” in *Unbound: An Interactive Journal of Christian Social Justice*, December 23, 2015. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)