

A SERMON FROM ST STEPHEN'S

THE SMELL OF ADVENT

A sermon preached the 4th of December 2016, the 2nd Sunday of Advent, at St Stephen's Episcopal Church, Belvedere, CA, by the Rev'd Phillip Channing Ellsworth, Jr., Rector. Based on Isaiah II: 1 – 10.

Can poets (can men in television)
Be saved? It is not easy
To believe in unknowable justice
Or pray in the name of a love
Whose name one's forgotten: libera
Me, libera C (dear C)
And all poor s-o-b's who never
Do anything properly, spare
Us in the youngest day when all are
Shaken awake, facts are facts,
(And I shall know exactly what happened
Today between noon and three)
That we, too, may come to the picnic
With nothing to hide, join the dance
As it moves in perichoresis,
Turns about the abiding tree.

— W. H. Auden
from "Compline," in *Horae Canonicae*

God as *lumberjack*. Can you imagine that? Isaiah does. Our text this morning picks up where the 10th chapter of Isaiah leaves off, with the image of God as a great forester cutting and felling whole forests with his mighty axe.

Behold, the Lord, the LORD of hosts
will lop the boughs with terrifying power;
the great in height will be hewn down,
and the lofty will be brought low.
He will cut down the thickets of the forest
with an axe,
and Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall.

In the same vision that gives us the *Sanctus* ("Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts . . ."), God through Isaiah likens the kingdoms of Israel and Judah to trees that will be cut down so that only stumps will remain.

Even if a tenth part remain in [the land],
it will be burned again,
like a terebinth or an oak
whose stump remains standing

when it is felled.

The holy seed is its stump. [Isaiah 6: 13]

These are the lyrics behind the 15th-century Advent carol: "*Lo, how a rose e'er blooming / From tender stem hath sprung, / Of Jesse's lineage coming, / As men of old have sung . . . Isaiah 'twas foretold it, / the Rose I have in mind.*"

The tree is dead, but there's life in the stump. You needn't come from a family of lumberjacks to get this. If you've looked out the cold windows of your personal Department of the Interior and seen stumps across your landscape, you understand.

This is how things would be for Israel in exile. The Most High judges Israel's sin and rebellion more severely than he judges the sin and rebellion of other nations willy-nilly. Being preferred brings both privilege and danger. The Apostle Paul calls Jesus 'the second Adam' because Jesus does what the first Adam was supposed to do: contend with the adversary. The story of Moses and the prophets is the story of God concentrating sin and

uncleanness, funneling it through the holy nation, so that it could rest on the Messiah — *the spotless Rose* — who will bear it away.

That Israel was called to bear the weight of God's battle against sin is 'there' in the context of Abraham's call in Genesis [12]. Yahweh would no longer flood the earth. The nations have been scattered and God would no longer deal with them directly; instead the Most High will contend against sin within the house of Abraham. And coming out of that upcountry village — Can anything good come out of Nazareth? — the deliverance of that house would be decided in the land once and for all.

God sees the affliction of his people under Pharaoh and is moved to action because of it. This is why God preferred Moses in the first place. So in today's lesson from Isaiah, when we're told that the shoot from the stump of Jesse shall judge *not* by what his eyes see or by what his ears hear, this is surpassing strange. The 'shoot from the stump of Jesse' is going to detect the wicked and vindicate the righteous — how? By his nose; his sense of smell. "His *delight* shall be in the fear of the Lord. / He shall not judge by what his eyes see, / or decide by what his ears hear . . ." [Isaiah 11: 3]

English Bibles obscure Isaiah's plain sense poetry here. The Hebrew word [*waháriychô*] translated *delight* means, simply, *smell*. The shoot of the stump of Jesse will have an acute sense of smell, a keen nose for the fear of the Lord. To paraphrase this the way my lumberjack Grandpa Jack and my father would, he'll have a really good bullshit detector.

In some churches and mosques, men stand at the door and keep people from entering if they detect the scent of evil. At St Stephen's Church, our ushers don't do that. Our verger Jo Ann might! In the Middle Ages, that's what vergers were for. They were bouncers with maces. They kept the riff-raff from messing with the clergy at the procession! Animals do this. They arrive at eerily accurate judgments of others based on their scent.

So there's no pretending around God's Messiah. We can look good, we can sound great, but our scent, our

nature, will give us away. Wolves in sheep's clothing will be detected for what they are. "He will smite the earth with the rod of his mouth, he will slay the wicked with the breath of his lips."

Putting to rights all the world's wrongs — we believe the one we long for midwinter might somehow have the power to do the job. But Isaiah goes from strange to cockamamie. "The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. The cow and the bear shall feed; their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. The sucking child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put his hand on the adder's den." The wicked and the righteous will live together in harmony. The shoot from the stump of Jesse will bring justice and peace, what the Apostle Paul calls the "peace which passes understanding." Wolves and lambs together. Lions and oxen together. Children and snakes together. Republicans and Democrats.

What in the Sam Hill is going on here?! If you're a sheep, you identify a wolf to survive not to make friends and influence people. That mangy bastard over there licking his fangs wants to have you for dinner!

And yet. When the shoot from the stump of Jesse reveals who we are, something ridiculous will happen. If we're lions, we will do what we wouldn't be caught dead doing: eat straw like an ox, and not only eat straw like an ox but eat *with* an ox instead of *eating the ox*. If we're oxen, we won't be afraid. The lion will be transformed. The lion won't smell like a lion anymore. It will look like a lion. It will sound like a lion. But it will be different.

That's the smell of Advent. I very rarely notice it. It's in the air this time of year. It comes and goes, mostly goes, but I live for it. I have a nose for it now the way old Isaiah did a thousand years ago. A shoot from the stump of Jesse is coming, and he has the power to change not less than everything.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

*St Stephen's Church welcomes you to worship with us at 3 Bay View Avenue, Belvedere, CA,
Sunday mornings at 8 or 10 o'clock. For more information about our life and mission
please email us at office@ststephenschurch.org, call us at 415-435-4501,
or visit us at www.ststephenschurch.org.*