

Aaron's Staff That Budded

Hebrews 9:1-5; Numbers 16&17; John 15:1- 11

It's the time of year when, in our society, everyone's thoughts turn toward giving and receiving gifts. Now the holidays have gone commercial to be sure, but I said to you last week that I don't think that gift giving is at the heart of the problem. In other words, it's not the impulse to take thought of and express love to the people around us that corrupts the holiday. The whole point of the holiday is that God thought about us and that his love toward us led him to give us his Son as a gift.

The holidays become corrupt only if the stuff we give and receive so upstage our thoughts and feelings toward each other that we lose sight of the love that first impelled God to reach for us even though we were lost and estranged and far away from him. Really, we've studied all year here in church all the clues that God has embedded in the story of his people that one day his own Son would come and live among us and forgive and heal us to the point where we could show the sort of thought and compassion for each other that God has shown for us ever since we left the Garden.

And we saw last week how the Ark of the Covenant, that big gold box that lived right at center stage in Israel's ancient sanctuary, the Ark of the Covenant was actually sort of a Christmas gift box, loaded with gifts from God, designed first of all to help God's people remember how faithful God had been to them while they were on their journey from Egypt to a place of their own in the Promised Land. But then, secondly, the gifts were put there in the Ark as a hint to God's people that Someone better and more real than Moses, something better and more real than Moses' Law was on the way.

And the term that appears in John's gospel to mean better and more real is the word, "true". So early in his gospel, John called Jesus "*the true light...coming into the world.*" And Jesus called himself "*the true bread which coming down from heaven gives life to the world.*" So what we have seen and will see this Advent season is that God had Moses load into the Ark of the Covenant gift-reminders of things God had done for Moses and Israel that would become better and more real, they would become "true", when Jesus would do them again more than a thousand years after Moses.

So last week, we looked into the gift box, the Ark, and we found that Moses had left Israel "*a golden urn filled with manna*". You see, God had fed Moses and the Israelites all forty years they were in the desert with a breadlike substance they called "*manna*". But once they were in the Promised Land, they had all the wheat fields they needed so God gave them no more manna except for a single golden urn that was kept in the Ark so that Israel would remember that they had a God who could feed them, who could meet their needs even when they had no seeds or crops or fields of their own.

And, of course, being human, the Israelites forgot. Until one hot day centuries later Jesus led a crowd of more than five thousand disciples out to the far side of Lake Galilee and, just like in the days of Moses, the people grew weary and faint in the desert and, just like in the days of Moses, Jesus was able to feed them all with no seed, no crop, no field, just a single rucksack with a handful of bread and fish. It was wonderful just like in the days of Moses.

But the point of the exercise was not just to repeat what Moses did centuries before, not just to provide a physical answer to a momentary need. The point was to lift up Jesus as the True Bread, come down from heaven to give life to the world. Because the fact is that life for you and me is a long trek through a spiritual wilderness where we are bound to falter and faint. Physically, emotionally, psychologically, intellectually we will run out of provisions unless we daily look to Jesus for the stuff we'll need. Jesus said, "*He who eats my flesh and drinks my blood abides in me and I in him.*" So Jesus is the spiritual manna that will sustain us through what stands between us and heaven.

So there's an urn in the gift box with all the manna we'll need to get us safely home. And right next to the urn, God left in the gift box "*Aaron's staff that budded*". Did you ever wonder about the fact that all the gifts that celebrate the birth of Christ get left under a tree? It turns out that, from cover to cover in the Bible, God's intention to save us and to make us his own is expressed by the presence of a tree.

The infamous tree in the Garden of Eden was the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. It was a false tree, forbidden to us by God and it became the place where humanity lost its way. But right next to it in the center of the garden sanctuary at Eden was another tree, the Tree of Life, which spoke of God's intention to love us and to save us whatever transpired at the other tree.

Having lost our way, having bent and broken our hearts and minds at the false tree, we cannot approach the Tree of Life, unprotected and unassisted by God. In Eden, a cherubim, a warrior angel with a flaming sword was stationed there to teach us that none of us will reach the Tree of Life until God has paved the way and straightened our hearts and minds as well. So the riddle facing fallen humanity is how do we reach the Tree of Life when the bentness and brokenness of our own hearts and minds disqualify us from ever GOing there?

And the answer to the riddle appears over and over again in the story of God's people. In the book of Numbers, very soon after all the wonders of the Exodus and the Red Sea and Mt. Sinai, things went south for Moses and Israel. They couldn't make their way home. Moses got God's people to the borders of the Promised Land, but their hearts and minds were too bent to simply trust God and enter into the home he had promised them. They fumbled what God told them to do and they ended up banished to the wander the wilderness for a whole generation longer.

Politically speaking, that should have been the end of Moses and Aaron as the leaders of God's people. Everyone blamed Moses and Aaron for the failures of heart and mind that they all held

in common. The two brothers were soon betrayed by a member of their own tribe, a Levite named Korah who assembled a coalition of 250 tribal leaders who manipulated the people to think that they all had as much right as Moses to speak for God and as Aaron to lead the people in worship. It's a complicated, violent, terrifying story.

But the long and the short of it was that God ended the insurrection by having leaders from all twelve tribes of Israel plant their walking sticks right in front of God in the Holy Place in the tabernacle. And Aaron's staff with his name carved into it represented the tribe of Levi. So there was left in front of God that night a little forest of walking sticks. And, when the leaders of the Twelve Tribes returned the next morning to reclaim their sticks, what they found was eleven walking sticks and one living tree.

The staff left there by Aaron had blossomed into a small almond tree with green leaves and clusters of nuts hanging off the branches. And the point of the miracle was to say to God's people that, in those days, it was the worship and the sacrifices and the teaching of Aaron that would get God's people to that place, that Tree of Life where forgiveness and healing and guidance and holiness could be found. The point being that we are not free to choose any avenue that suits our fancy if we really want to find our way back to God. Israel back then and you and I today are bound to approach God by that one path, through that one worship, by that Person, that one Savior that God chooses for us to learn from and to follow.

It was Aaron back then, but the whole point of the gift box was that Someone better and more real than Aaron was on the way. So God had Moses load Aaron's living staff, that strange little Tree of Life into the Ark to open Israel's hearts to the Savior and the Gospel and the Worship that was waiting for them down the road, over the horizon and in the future. And Israel, being human and bent and broken for the most part forgot. But Jesus remembered.

So on the night of the Last Supper, as he and his disciples threaded through orchards and vineyards on their way to Gethsemane, Jesus spoke of himself as that Person, that Savior toward which Aaron's staff had pointed more than a thousand years before: *"I am the true vine,"* he said, *"and my Father is the vinedresser. Every branch in me that does not bear fruit, he takes away, and every branch that does bear fruit he prunes that it may bear more fruit."*

The point being that we come alive spiritually, our lives bear fruit spiritually, not by any independent action we take or worship we offer, not by how much or how well we serve or pray or give. But rather we show life and bear fruit to the extent we love and identify with and follow Christ as that one Person we can trust to heal and forgive and change us into the people God always meant us to be.

"I am the vine," Jesus said, *"you are the branches, he who abides in me and I in him, he bears much fruit. For apart from me you can do nothing."* In other words, what makes us alive is the organic relationship we cultivate with Jesus, not each of us on our own, in our own way according to our own fancy, but all of us together. Each time Jesus commands us to *"abide"* in

him, the verb in Greek is second person plural. It follows that *“the true vine...the Tree of Life”* is a single living entity in which we all gain life and bear fruit together.

All the pictures of the Church God inspired the apostles to teach us involve our being worked together into a single living entity. The Church they teach about is both complex and one. We are all living building blocks, different colors, different shapes, being mortared together into a single living sanctuary. We are each individual organs in the body of Christ, different in our gifts and functions, but all of us dependent on one another for life and goodness.

And here today in this passage, we are all branches on the same Vine, sharing a common life, bearing a common fruit, each of us and all of us subject to the care and discipline of the same Vinedresser. *“My Father,”* Jesus said, *“ is the vine dresser.”*

Small wonder then that God was so severe in Numbers 16 with Korah and the party he led, who wanted to put aside the priest God chose, humble, fallible Aaron, and storm their way back God's sanctuary, finding God's tree by a path of their own choosing, all of them equally in charge, their worship defined by their own fancy, self anointed, self directed, accountable only to themselves. Empty, fruitless, walking sticks bound for the flames.

But of his own disciples, Jesus tells a different story. *“You are already clean”*, Jesus told them, *“already pruned because of the word I've spoken to you...If you abide in me and my words abide in you, ask whatever you wish and it will come to pass for you.”* All these verbs are second person plural. His disciples learned a gospel in common, shared a prayer life in common. They bore fruit together, became his disciples together.

“As the Father has loved me,” Jesus said, *“so I have loved you. Abide in my love. If you keep my commandments, you will abide in my love as I have kept the Father's commandments and abide in his love.”* The Tree of Life Jesus invites us to join and commands us to share comes alive because its roots are set in that unseen love that exists in the heart of God, Father for Son, Son for Spirit, Spirit for Father, all of them set and one in their love for us. And the love that flows in the true Vine bears fruit in the sort of joy that Jesus possessed because he was so certain the Father loved him.