

The Branch of the LORD

Isaiah 11:1-5; 4:2-6

A few years ago, I went on a kick reading the serial novelists of the 1800's. Back in those days, starving authors used to keep themselves alive by selling their novels chapter by chapter to popular magazines for people to read month after month. It made for a really compelling sort of writing because if you wanted a commission for next month, your chapter had to end on a cliffhanger, some sort of crisis that would get your readers lining up at the newsstand for the next edition.

And that's how a lot of books we consider high literature today got written; "Les Miserable" by Victor Hugo, "The Count of Monte Cristo" by Albert Dumas, and the book that leapt to mind as I was reading Isaiah this week was Charles Dicken's "A Tale of Two Cities". Dickens wrote about London and Paris as each city reacted to the crisis that the French Revolution posed to old Europe as the 1700's turned into the 1800's. And the reason Isaiah reminded me of Dickens was the opening line of "The Tale of Two Cities": "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times...".

Because Isaiah also lived in a season of crisis in the late seven hundreds of the centuries counting down to Christ. By Isaiah's day, the glory days of David and Solomon's great empire were long gone, David's descendants ruled over Judah, a tiny little kingdom consisting of greater Jerusalem and not much else. We remembered last week that, in Isaiah's lifetime, God's people would stand on the walls of the Holy City and watch helplessly as Assyrian chariots and cavalry rode around the city limits making the people whimper and the walls tremble and engulfing the whole city in a dust cloud.

And it fell to Isaiah to sing songs and write stories about how God's people fell to such a fate. And at the heart of the story will be the sins and failures of the princes and princesses and kings and queens who had lived in David's palace and reigned on David's throne through all those generations when God's people were busy losing their way. The great, great grandson of David and Solomon who misruled God's people in Isaiah's day was a man named Ahaz.

Ahaz was a weak and faithless king, who would not avail himself of God's help even when Isaiah offered it to him, who was so paranoid about his Syrian and Samaritan neighbors that he became the man who invited the world's worst superpower, the Assyrians, into Palestine to protect him from people who were nowhere near as dangerous as Assyria. Ahaz was devious

and clever and worldly, he set up an Assyrian idol in God's temple as a way of securing foreign aid from Assyrians.

So if you loved the Lord in those days, the sight of Ahaz on a throne in Jerusalem was enough to make you weep. And Isaiah will complain about him before Advent is over, but this morning in our Call to Worship, Isaiah has taken to the city square to sing a song of hope to God's people in the worst of times. He sang, *"There shall come a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit..."*. It was common in ancient poetry to sing of kings and kingdoms as trees.

That's why Jesus in the gospels talked about tiny, little mustard seeds becoming the largest tree in the garden! He was saying about you and me and the church, "We may look small now, but give God time and this kingdom will run the table, will stretch from horizon to horizon." And Isaiah is making a similar point in his song this morning. Jesse was David's father, the father of Israel's royal house.

And the huge mustard tree that David and Solomon had built in their day had fallen on hard times. All that was left was Ahaz, a silly, evil little stump. But no worries, Isaiah sang to God's people. The root of that stump was Jesse and from that root one day would *"come forth a shoot...a branch"* that would *"bear fruit"* in qualities and character that will transcend not just evil, feckless, Ahaz, but also even David and Solomon who had been so great and so good and so powerful in their day.

Another great king was headed Israel's way, Isaiah sang, *"And the Spirit of the LORD will rest on him, the Spirit of wisdom and understanding, the Spirit of counsel and might, the Spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the LORD. And his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD."*

Two things we want to note about the Branch that would arise from Jesse's root. First, that what makes a leader great in God's kingdom is the presence of God's Spirit, that it is God's Spirit who works in a person's life so that he "bears fruit" in character and qualities that mark him as coming from and belonging to God. So the Branch from Jesse's root, the next great mustard tree that would arise from David's family would be marked by the presence and power of God's Spirit in his life and his reign and in his gospel.

And that, of course, would be Jesus who was both descended from Jesse, from the royal line humanly speaking, but who also was conceived by God's own Spirit to be God's own Son. But, even so, Jesus was content to live some 30 years as a village carpenter until one day, on the Jordan River, the Spirit visibly descended on him and set him on a course, started him in a

ministry in which all those qualities Isaiah sang about would come into play, *“wisdom and understanding...counsel and might...knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”*

And it is the picture of Jesus as a Branch bearing Holy Spirit fruit that inspired the apostles in the New Testament to speak of us as branches, each of us bearing *“the fruit of the Spirit”*, Paul wrote, in our own lives, *“...love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.”* Jesus put it this way, he said, *“I am the Vine, 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.”*

And the practical point to gain from this is that when Jesus commands us to abide in him, he’s teaching us to trust and to lean on the same Spirit who allowed Jesus to bear fruit in goodness and wisdom and power as *“...the branch of the LORD”*. So Jesus, God’s only begotten in the flesh, was a human branch, like us, abiding in his Father, learning and gaining and living out his Father’s goodness and power as his Father’s own Spirit empowered him to do.

And it’s this reality that makes Isaiah’s song about a Branch from Jesse make sense. Because one of the qualities the Spirit of the LORD will provide this branch of Jesse, this future king of Israel is *“the fear of the LORD.”* But if the future king is Jesus, God own divine Son in human flesh, why would sinless, divine Jesus need to be taught *“the fear of the LORD”* by his own Father’s Spirit?

Well, Jesus didn’t fear his Father in the sense that he ever did anything wrong for which his Father would ever punish him. He feared his Father because by becoming one of us, he took on our mission to tend and guard and beautify this world as a sanctuary garden where people like you and me could live with God in peace and happiness. But for that to ever happen, sinful fallen men and women would have to give up our delusions of grandeur and live for God, shape our lives to fit his design, his plan for who we should be and how we should live.

And that is what Jesus did, he *“feared the LORD”* as that human king Isaiah saw in the worst of times when his own generation was so far afoul of God that only God’s own Son guided and empowered by God’s own Spirit could ever undo the damage and heal the injuries that had turned David and Solomon’s great old tree into just a stump holding on for dear life. No human king, no spiritual leader, then or now, would ever fear the LORD, respect and love his Father, the way Jesus was prepared to do, to accomplish his mission of redeeming the world as God’s own Garden and redeeming us as God’s own children and priests.

So Jesus feared the Lord in precisely that way that Adam and Eve never did, and you and I never could. He learned and loved what was right and did that, no matter what it cost him. Isaiah sang

about him, “...*his delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.*” And one of the qualities that Jesus possessed and we gain from his Spirit is objectivity.

Isaiah sang about Israel’s future king, “*He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or render a verdict by any hearsay, but with righteousness shall he judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.*” The point being that, Jesus fearing his Father, our fearing the Lord involves subjecting our own thoughts and feelings and reactions to that justice and goodness that finds its origin in the Father’s heart. Which could seem far off and abstract, almost irrelevant if we ever forgot how often and how deeply our own sin compromises our own judgment, how we see and feel and react to the swirl of people and events and circumstances all around us.

The Scriptures teach a dim view of our ability to understand and rightly judge our own thoughts and motives and actions, never mind those of the people around us. A generation after Isaiah, in the same city, speaking to the children of the same people Isaiah wasn’t able to reach, Jeremiah would sing this, he spoke for God, “*The heart is deceitful above all things, and is desperately sick; who can understand it? I the LORD search the heart and test the mind, to give to every man according to his ways, according to the fruit of his deeds.*”

Strangely, as an overwrought sixteen year old, new to faith and just starting to walk with God, it was the objectivity I saw in God’s word and learned from God’s Spirit that set my life on a course that could be described as reasonably sane. At the time I was bitter at my own father, for lots of reasons, but the worst was that every time I sought his help to get a driver’s license, he found some new excuse that it couldn’t be done. So for six years I waited, until finally I was out the house and on my own and I paid for driver’s ed. and got the thing myself.

I thought he didn’t care that, in our rich suburban town, all the way through high school, I alone was still on my bike, missing those rides and dates and all the action I imagined everyone else had but me. I thought he was stingy, that all he cared about was saving on insurance. But God’s word taught me to “*honor*” my “*father and mother*”, to “*obey*” my parents, Paul wrote, “*for this is right in the Lord*”. So that was God’s objective truth for me, no matter how mad I was about having no license, and really that was only first on the list of what my father did to made me mad.

And I think it was the God’s Spirit in the back of my mind that prompted me to remember that both my mother and my father had lost brothers in their early twenties in accidents, one in a car, one in a boat. And so maybe it wasn’t just greed and laziness that made my father not want to see me driving a car. So what reading God’s word and abiding in God’s Spirit begin to teach me was objectivity, the art of looking past the raging passions of my own heart to learn what God

says, and to see what the other guy is wrestling with that causes him to look so unjust and cruel to me.

This objectivity is what an Israelite prophet would have wanted to see in his king in the worst of times, and Ahaz didn't begin to fill the bill. But Isaiah was inspired to see that one day Jesus would. Think how many souls there were in Jesus' entourage that everyone else had given up on. Think how many times the Spirit prompted Jesus to stand up and speak up for Samaritans, for centurions, for tax gatherers and women taken in sin and lepers who shouldn't be touched because God's law and God's Spirit allowed him to rise above the petty narrowness and hatreds that so often prevent us from seeing the right and seeing each other.

There's so much I want to say about this. What I just read from the pulpit was from Isaiah 4, another vision where Jesus appears as "*the branch of the LORD*", a passage which dealt with how men and women became estranged in marriage and in temple and in society in old Jerusalem just before the exile when people lost track of God's Spirit and his Word. And the notion there again is that a king was on the way, who would bring the best of times, redeeming Israel's temple into the garden sanctuary it was meant to be, and redeeming men and women, to come home at last, safe and peaceful and joyful together with God, back in the garden.