

The Tree of Promise

- <sup>1</sup> *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;  
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.*
- <sup>2</sup> *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—  
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,  
the Spirit of counsel and of might,  
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—*
- <sup>3</sup> *and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.  
He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,  
or decide by what he hears with his ears;*
- <sup>4</sup> *but with righteousness he will judge the needy,  
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.  
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;  
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.*
- <sup>5</sup> *Righteousness will be his belt  
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.*
- <sup>6</sup> *The wolf will live with the lamb,  
the leopard will lie down with the goat,  
the calf and the lion and the yearling<sup>[a]</sup> together;  
and a little child will lead them.*
- <sup>7</sup> *The cow will feed with the bear,  
their young will lie down together,  
and the lion will eat straw like the ox.*
- <sup>8</sup> *The infant will play near the cobra's den,  
and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.*
- <sup>9</sup> *They will neither harm nor destroy  
on all my holy mountain,  
for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.*
- <sup>10</sup> *In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to  
him, and his resting place will be glorious.*

Tell me, do you know anything about your family tree? Have you done any research into the generations that have come before you? For example, do you know the names of your great-great-grandparents? You realize, a lot of people these days are really into genealogy. Websites like Ancestry.com or Legacy Family Tree, allow people to trace their heritage back a dozen generations or more. You'll hear of people combing through birth records or checking out old tombstones to piece their family tree together. And you can certainly see why. There is something kind of exciting about finding out where you come from, who those people were. In a sense, your ancestors help define who you are today.

Well, of all the family trees in history, there is probably no tree more famous than the one that we read a few minutes ago in our gospel lesson. St. Matthew records the very first words in

the entire New Testament when he writes, *“This is the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah the son of David, the son of Abraham (Matthew 1:1).* In other words, it’s Jesus’ Family Tree. But today, we’re going to call it

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Unfortunately, there was a time in history when that tree didn’t look so promising. In fact, instead of calling it a tree, God once called it a stump. Just for a minute I want you to think about the difference between a tree and a stump. When you think of a tree, what adjectives come to mind? Big, beautiful, alive and growing. A tree, by its very nature, has potential. It has a future. Now, contrast that with a stump. I mean, a stump is not the sign of life. It’s the sign of what once was alive, and now isn’t.

My friends, that’s why, for a time, the Bible referred to the line of the Savior not as a tree, but as a stump, as the prophet Isaiah calls it, the stump of Jesse. Why the stump of Jesse? Well, let’s review a little Bible history, Or in this case, let’s do a little genealogical review.

In our Old Testament lesson today, we heard that the Prophet Samuel went to the house of Jesse and anointed Jesse’s youngest son David to be the next king of Israel. Then, after David ascended the throne, God made David a truly remarkable promise. God said to David, through the prophet Nathan, *“When your days are over and you rest with your ancestors, I will raise up your offspring to succeed you, your own flesh and blood, and I will establish his kingdom. He is the one who will build a house for my Name.”* (2 Sam. 7:12-13) That’s a reference to the fact that David’s son Solomon would succeed David as the king of Israel. And Solomon would be the one to build a temple for the Lord in the city of Jerusalem. But God’s promise did not end there. God went on to tell David, *“Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”* (Second Samuel 7:16) With those words, God was basically promising David that his descendants would form a dynasty. They were going to rule over the nation of Israel for centuries. And it’s true. You can trace the entire line of David’s descendants who were kings over Israel for 400 years.

But here’s the problem. As each successive generation moved further and further away from David, they also moved further and further away from David’s God. The descendants of David began to turn away to worship other gods, the gods of sex and money and power. And what’s worse, when the kings turned away, the people of Israel followed them. Little by little the people of Israel abandoned God’s law and forgot his promises.

Now, in love for his people, God sent one messenger after another to warn them about the consequences of their behavior. The prophets pleaded with them to turn back to the God who loved them and had redeemed them from the slavery of Egypt. But God’s pleas fell on deaf ears. It was as if all the people could remember was that God had promised was that their kings were going to rule forever. Finally, God had had enough. Because of their open idolatry and rebellion against him, God decided to get out the axe and chop down the line of David. And the ax that God used to take down the tree of David was...the nation of Babylon. In 586 BC, Nebuchadnezzar and his army invaded the land of milk and honey. They destroyed the city of Jerusalem; they carted off its inhabitants into captivity. And the last descendant of David to sit on the throne in Jerusalem, the King Zedekiah, was put in the bronze shackles and hauled off to Babylon. But not before he watched as his sons were put to death and his eyes gouged out so that the last thing he saw, in effect, the tree of David being cut down and turned into a stump. My, how the mighty have fallen.

But now, just for a minute, I want you to imagine how you would feel if you were a believer living in the land of Israel at the time when the city of Jerusalem fell. The Bible tells us

that even in the midst of all that destruction, there were still some believers who were clinging to the promises that God had made them—including the promise that the line of David throne would endure forever. I mean, if you were one of those believers, don't you think you might be saying, "Wait a minute. It sure doesn't look like God is keeping that promise about the line of David. There aren't any descendants of David on the throne anymore. I guess God broke that promise. Maybe God is not so trustworthy after all. Maybe I should be looking for someone else to put my faith in."

You realize, it's not just Old Testament believers who can find themselves thinking that way. It can happen to you and me too. When things don't go the way we expect, when it seems like God's promises are not matching up with our circumstances, when it seems that God is not making good on his promises to us, we're tempted to think that God is not reliable. God is not worthy of our trust. I mean, if God is not going to keep all of his promises, why should I believe that he's going to keep any of them? That's the doubt that creeps into human minds and hearts when it seems like God is not keeping his promise.

But, you see, that's exactly why God had the prophet Isaiah write down the words of our text for today. You see, God wanted his people back then, and still today, to know that the stump that looked like it was dead was not dead. Rather, it was temporarily dormant. The prophet describes what was going to happen. He writes, *A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.* Yes, as the hymn-writer once put it, "Behold, a Branch is Growing." That picture of a tender little shoot growing out of a seemingly dead stump is of course a prophecy about Jesus. Jesus is the fulfillment of Isaiah's words. How do we know that? Because the angel Gabriel spoke to Mary about the child she was going to bear, "*He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his Father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.* (Luke 1:32-33) In other words, Jesus would be the fulfillment of the promises that God had made to King David ten centuries earlier, namely, that one of David's descendants would sit on the throne forever.

I mean, just look at how Isaiah's words find their perfect fulfillment in Jesus. 1. Isaiah says that this tender, little shoot (think helpless little baby), would be a descendant of Jesse. Right? Both Mary and Joseph were "from the house and line of David," the son of Jesse. 2. Isaiah says about this branch from Jesse's rootstock, *The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord.* (Isaiah 11:2) What is that, other than a reference to how the Holy Spirit came down and rested on Jesus at his baptism, thereby publicly identified him as the Messiah, that is, the Anointed One?

3. Isaiah says that this shoot from the stump of Jesse *will not judge by what he sees with his eyes or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.* (Isaiah 11:3) In other words, unlike so many of the bad rulers who had oppressed the poor and ignored the needy, Jesus will be a king who will provide true justice for the oppressed. In fact, as Isaiah puts it, *Righteousness will be his belt and faithfulness the sash around his waist.* (Isaiah 11:5) In other words, Jesus will be the one who is perfectly faithful to the will of his Father, perfectly faithful in carrying out God's plan of salvation, a plan which includes dressing a world full of sinners with his righteousness. Through his perfect life and innocent death, Jesus would be the one who would ultimately make peace between God and man.

In fact, here in our text, the prophet describes that peace with God, yes, that peace that

Jesus will restore to all creation—the prophet describes that peace in a rather unique way. The prophet says, *The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion and the yearling together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox.* (He even goes to far as to say...) *The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest. They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the Lord.* (Isaiah 11:6-9)

With those words, the prophet is not describing some kind of millennial kingdom that Jesus will establish between now and his second coming. Rather, he's using picture language to describe the kingdom that believers will enjoy after Jesus' second coming. A paradise where there will be no death or dying, a world in which there will be no danger or fear. A world in which we will live in perfect harmony with nature.

My friends, do you see the purpose that these words of Isaiah serve in our lives today? In effect, they allow us to connect the dots in Jesus' family tree. They allow us to bridge the gap between the time when it looked like the royal line of David was dead, and the time when the true Son of David emerged from a virgin's womb to life and die and rise again to establish a kingdom that will never end.

Earlier in the service, I asked you, 'Why do you think God included that long list of names from Jesus' family tree in the Bible?' Did you decide it was so that someday a pastor in Appleton would struggle to get all the pronunciations right? Could be. But I think there are maybe some more substantial reasons that the Holy Spirit saw fit to record Jesus' family tree in the pages of Scripture:

1. God wanted to underscore the fact that Jesus really was a descendant of David. Those words in Matthew, chapter 1 prove that Jesus was the human being he needed to be in order to be our Savior. Jesus had to be true man so that he could live and die as the substitute for sinners.
2. As you look over Jesus' family tree, you see some pretty shady characters, people guilty of murder, adultery, prostitution. Yet they were all Jesus' ancestors. That reminds us that Jesus came from a line of sinners like us in order to save a bunch of sinners like us.
3. And maybe most important, each one of the names in that list represents a link in a chain of God's promises to send a savior from the line of David. Take out one link and God's promise is broken. But all those names together prove that God really does keep his promises. In fact, that's why you can call Jesus' Family Tree, including that shoot that sprang from the stump of Jesse—it's why you can call it The Tree of Promise. And to think that, by God's grace, you dear Christians are the fruit of that tree. To God be the glory. Amen.