

Centre Congregational Church, U.C.C.
Second Sunday in Advent
December 4, 2022
The Rev Dr Scott Couper
“Stand as a Signal”
Second of Four sermons in a series entitled “Advent Unwrapped”
Hebrew Scripture: Isaiah 11:1-10



Credit: "O Root",

Sister Ansgar Holmberg, CSJ

Last week, on the first Sunday of Advent, we discussed the ‘Second Coming’ of Christ, as opposed to Christ’s ‘First Coming’ in a nativity manger.¹ The Second Coming is one of the neglected themes of the Advent season. The Second Coming

¹ Actually, there are three ‘Comings’. A Christian perspective, and more specifically a Trinitarian interpretation, views the First Coming to have occurred at Creation, the Second Coming at the nativity, and the Third Coming during the *Parousia* (apocalypse). The evangelical fundamentalists have a 2.5, or a ‘Rapture’.

is often referred to as the ‘apocalypse’, which in Greek means ‘revealing’ or ‘disclosure’. We reminded ourselves to “stay alert” to the inbreaking of God’s spirit in our world today, the disclosure of God’s will, through the prophetic witness of many brothers and sisters in Brattleboro. Hence, the title of our Advent series is “Advent Unwrapped”. My hope is that this short series will *unwrap* some neglected wisdom from our Advent scriptures.

Our scripture this morning from the prophesy of Isaiah reads, “A shoot will come-up from the stump of Jesse; from the roots a Branch will bear fruit” (11:1). The conclusion of the passage reads, “In that day”, the day of the Lord, or the day of God’s reign, “the Root of Jesse will *stand as a signal* for the peoples” (11:10).² Given that this metaphor of ‘Jesse’s root’ or ‘Jesse’s branch’ is repeated and is thus important, I thought this morning we would ‘unwrap’ its meaning. What does it mean for ‘the Branch of Jesse to stand *as a signal*’?

This past week I had supper with Becky Day and Lynn Herzog (together with our chef, Georg, Lynn’s husband, who made a stunning African peanut and chicken stew). During dinner, I shared pictures of my children (Micah and Madeline) and I hiking-up what is called ‘Signal Hill’ in Cape Town, South Africa. Signal Hill is a large

² The apostle Paul took a cue from Isaiah: “For I tell you that Christ became a servant to the circumcised to show God’s truthfulness, in order to confirm the promised given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy...Isaiah says, ‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope (Romans 15:8-9a, 12).

promontory, somewhat shadowed in grandeur and lore by the more infamous Table Mountain. “The viewing point got its name from the position high above the Cape [Peninsula]. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Dutch settlers used signal flags to communicate weather warnings and instructions to the arriving ships below, many of whom did battle with the stormy, unforgiving bay”.³ Hence the mountain overlook is still to this day called ‘Signal Hill’. While hiking with my children on Signal Hill, I could see in all directions for what seemed to be hundreds of miles. And presumably for hundreds of miles, people could see Signal Hill. It is a land mass so elevated that all on top and all below can see.

This morning we focus upon a different ‘signal’ than that which was shown on Signal Hill. During Advent, Christians focus is on Jesus the Christ as ‘a signal’: the Chosen One revealed to be a light to all nations.⁴ If you refer to the image painted by Sister Ansgar Holmberg on the cover of your service bulletin, you will see an infant babe, Jesus the Christ, at the top of a tree. The infant child is above all Creation and history. Hence, Jesus is a signal whereby “all the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious” (11:10).

³ Tarah Darge, blog for Cape Grace, “The Explosive Story Behind Cape Town’s Signal Hill”, Cape Grace on Cape Town’s Waterfront, ACCOR, <https://www.capegrace.com/blog/09/09/the-explosive-story-behind-cape-towns-signal-hill>, accessed December 4, 2022.

⁴Note there is a difference between Christ and Jesus. ‘Christ’ is universal, the Alpha and the Omega. ‘Jesus’ is the Christ in human form, the historical Palestinian. We should say Jesus the Christ, rather than Jesus Christ or Christ Jesus as they are *not* interchangeable surnames.

Most family trees have fewer ancestors at the top and many more descendants who live today at the bottom. In contrast, the image of the spiritual tree understands Jesus to be the Omega (the Last, and yet, also the First, the Alpha, see footnote 1) at the top. All who came *before* are at the bottom.⁵

Below Jesus the Christ, we see Mary, his mother, a significant and prominent part of the tree, holding him up as a signal. Continuing down the tree to its branches, we have ‘the multitudes’, that is me and you. They are also our ancestors in faith. They are Christians from the time of the disciples such as Priscilla and Paul. The multitudes also include our Hebrew ancestors, such as the Esther, and the priests Nehemiah and Ezra. One of the ancestor prophets would have been John the Baptist who proclaimed the coming of the signal. Intermixed with the peoples are verdant leaves representing life. The bucolic foliage reminds one of a scene described by the prophet Ezekiel in which a river flows from the Temple in Jerusalem that waters all the earth. “Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither” (47:12). The leaves also point to what is often referred to as the Tree of Life that is described in the book of Revelation (22:1-4).⁶

⁵ Victoria Emily Jones, “Jesus as the Root/Shoot/branch of Jesse”, in *The Jesus Question*, December 18, 2015. Found at: <https://thejesusquestion.org/2015/12/18/jesus-as-the-rootshootbranch-of-jesse/>, accessed December 4, 2022.

⁶ Victoria Emily Jones, “Jesus as the Root/Shoot/branch of Jesse”, in *The Jesus Question*, December 18, 2015. Found at: <https://thejesusquestion.org/2015/12/18/jesus-as-the-rootshootbranch-of-jesse/>, accessed December 4, 2022.

Continuing down the image, we see a stump from which the entire tree grows. The 'Stump of Jesse' is that which we focus on today. The stump refers to what seems to be a broken promise God made to King David, who is often called "the son of Jesse". In our scripture, God gave a promise to David that his house, his kingdom, "will endure forever before me, your thrown will be established forever" (II Samuel 7:16). Well, as we all know, the Assyrians and the Babylonians seemingly ruined that promise. Yet, Isaiah and any others prophesied that from the remnant, from those who remained in the ashes and those who went into exile, new life would grow. For the ancient Hebrews, the stump represents the consequences of abandoning God; to abandon God is to abandon abundant life. John the Baptist used similar imagery in a scripture we do not have time to read today. John the Baptist spoke of a tree being felled ("The ax is ready is ready at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown into the fire", Matthew 3:11).⁷ So, like the Second Coming, 'repentance' is a key theme during the season of Advent. And the stump represents the consequences of abandoning God and the need to repent, or 'change direction'.

⁷ Note, theologically I do *not* believe that God 'punishes'. I believe that there are consequences for our deviance. Deviance leads to negative outcomes that need not require divine retribution. Nonetheless, the prophets and John the Baptist believed in divine wrath. The consequences are the same, we just arrive there through differing means.

At the bottom of the tree, the roots, are Adam and Eve. We recall that the Bible depicts Adam and Eve as the original ancestors who were first given life by Christ, who, in the Trinity, is one with the Creator and the Spirit. So, friends, the entire biblical narrative is this summarized in the painting "O Root".

The key take-away from the Bible, from Adam and Eve, from Noah and the ark, from the prophets, from John the Baptist, and from Jesus is that no matter our betrayal and disobedience, we are loved by God. Furthermore, the image declares that even from a hopeless state, a stump, life, and thus the Christ, will save and reign.

As proclaimers of the Gospel, as followers of The Way, as disciples of Jesus, we are to be a part of the story that prepares Creation for its and all peoples' salvation. We do this by standing as *a signal* for peace, justice, kindness, mercy, and most of all, love to all the world.

This was the word of God, and it was preached to the people of God, and the people of God responded, "Amen".