

“A twig of hope”
Westminster Presbyterian Church
December 4, 2016

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Game of Thrones’ John Snow was right: winter is coming. By now, most of our deciduous trees have shed their leaves. Lawns have stopped growing. Birds are migrating (except for these creepy crows you all have). The days have grown shorter, and snow has fallen. The world has somehow lost its hue; it’s grown quieter, emptier.

The winter that concerns me, however, is of a different sort. It’s the kind that crawls into your soul and nests there. It can be green and shining outside, but on the inside, it can feel like all the color’s gone out of the world. It may be that some of us are feeling that way right now. It might be depression; might be grief. May just be that you’re tired. Maybe there’s someone or something that’s hurting you, or perhaps life just hasn’t turned out the way you thought it would—the way you wanted it to.

I think of that Simon and Garfunkel song: “Look around, leaves are brown, and the sky is a hazy shade of winter... Hang on to your hopes, my friend. That’s an easy thing to say but if your hopes should pass away, [it’s] simply pretend that you can build them again.”

Isaiah and Paul, in our texts this morning, are peddling some mighty hope. But if winter is shut up inside your bones, it may feel like they’re just pretending. Heck, they may have wondered that themselves.

Isaiah looks around, and he sees a stump where once stood a grand tree, full of so much promise. That stump of Jesse refers to Jesse, King David’s father, and how—thanks to conquest and exile—that dynastic line has come to an end, squandered by lesser kings who turned from God long ago.

Paul looks around, and he sees a church small and divided. It’s been 30 years since Jesus’ crucifixion and ascension, and still no return of Christ. Jewish and Gentile Christians are turning against one another. The city of Rome itself is unsafe. A few years earlier, Jews were expelled from Rome by the Emperor Claudius, and a few years later, the Emperor Nero will begin his famous persecution of Christians.

I guess you could say that for Isaiah, and for Paul, the sky is a hazy shade of winter.

Of course, we know how this whole “seasons” thing works. Spring will come, and green buds will appear on those barren trees out there. Sometimes that’s all we need—just to know that things will get better. Isaiah spends most of the text we read this morning telling us that, one day,

the world will be at peace. We will sit on God's holy mountain—the same one we heard about last week—and on that mountain, there will be no more pain. But the truth is that when you're buried thick in winter's haze, when you can't even breathe it hurts so bad, it's not enough to hear that it's going to get better. You need it to be better right now.

That's why I keep coming back to that very first verse spoken by Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Long before Isaiah gets to his grand and glorious vision of the future, he beholds a tiny, weak sliver of life pushing out of dead ground. Nothing more than a twig of hope.

That's the thing about winter. We don't need to wait till spring to see life. Those trees out there may appear dead. But in reality, somewhere under that hard bark, there is life—dormant and safe, protected by evolutionary traits, honed over millions of years, that, sensing winter, slow down metabolism and photosynthesis.

Right now, somewhere in the corner of your garden, there is a seed lying dormant, and in it is life, waiting for its moment.

Isaiah and Paul have put on what we might call their Advent goggles. They are prophet glasses, poet eyes, apostolic microscopes. This special eye ware helps Isaiah and Paul see what has been obscured by winter.

Out of that stump of Jesse, Isaiah sees a shoot. Out of its roots, a branch. And this shoot, Isaiah says, shall stand as a signal to the people, a reminder of hope during hard winters. Through those winters a little child shall lead them, he says.

Paul says that he has seen this root of Jesse, too; it appeared to him on the road to Damascus, in the form of Jesus Christ—a wounded savior made for winters such as these, a child whom Matthew says descends from King David, son of Jesse, a restoration of the royal line.

This Advent word is a surprising kind of hope. Isaiah could have talked about a great, tall cedar. But instead, he talks about a small wisp of a plant. He doesn't ask us to sing aloud and dance. He doesn't deny the cold of winter. He simply invites us to behold the life that, though fragile, is stubbornly holding on.

We might think this image of hope naïve. But shoots emerge from stumps every day. I've seen flowers grow out of rock. I've stood on the ramparts of a fortress, on the Greek island of Rhodes, and seen buckets of roses growing out of the stonework. I've seen prayers, little scraps of paper, stuffed into the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, like seeds planted in rocky soil. I've even seen a Maple tree grow out of the bell tower of this very church.

I've seen a man with Alzheimer's brought back to life by the music of his youth. His name is Henry, an older man, bent over in his chair, barely responsive, who has spent more than 10 years in a nursing home. He's one of the subjects of a documentary called *Alive Inside*, which explores how music with a strong emotional connection can "awaken" people with Alzheimer's and dementia. In the video, he listens to an old tune on a pair of headphones, and almost instantaneously his eyes light up; he starts swaying and singing along. Suddenly, he's speaking clearly. He says, "I'm crazy about music, and you played beautiful music, beautiful sounds."

And I know of Austrian Jews who, out of their Holocaust experience, went on to form in Palestine a peaceful kibbutz named Netzer (which literally means "twig"). Having survived the horrors of the concentration camp in Buchenwald, they founded a religious community centered on farming, family, and worship, thus, in the words of Rabbi Margaret Wenig, sustaining yet another generation of families that might not have been.

This winter, let's put on our Advent goggles and look for those places where life is already pushing through stone and snow.

Barbara Lundblad writes, "What if we believe this fragile sign is God's beginning? Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our hearts, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: "Look! Look – there on the stump. Do you see that green shoot growing?" **Amen.**