

## **Sermon based on: Isaiah 11:1-10**

### **“Rally to the Root of Jesse”**

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by *Jason Thiel*

I think we'd all agree that there have been many changes in the past few months. In fact, as I look out my window I can scarcely recognize the world around me. As I take a breath, the air that was once so warm and fresh now seems cold and harsh. As I listen for the cheerful song of the birds, it seems to have faded in the distance. But I guess that's what we should expect when the seasons change. As fall fades away and winter sneaks in, it's difficult to look back at the warmth and life of the previous seasons. The cheerful blooms have succumbed to the frost. The last leaves dangle loosely from the branches like our hopes of one more warm summer day. The lively green has fallen to reveal a ghostly brown.

Are you ready for that? I hope so! Here in Wisconsin we have four solid months of that ahead of us. As those four months wane on, “Old Man Winter” starts to convince us that those lifeless stems and branches will never produce another bud again! Then comes April. After 120 days of winter, a tiny green bud forms on a branch. A small sprout appears out of the remains of last year's perennials. Can you think of a more uplifting sight? What a unique comfort and joy those tiny shoots bring!

If we think about it, it's amazing how excited we get over something so little. But it's not at all out of line. In fact, that is the picture the Holy Spirit paints in Isaiah's prophecy. God's nation of Israel was once a thriving forest. But when they started neglecting God, they stopped producing fruit and foliage. Here in Isaiah they were a lifeless, faithless, petrified forest that was about to be cleared out. Isaiah prophesied that all that would remain were the stumps and roots of the once mighty forest of Israel. 120 days of lifeless branches doesn't seem so bad does it? Amidst all this death and destruction was there any hope for God's chosen people? Is there any hope for us as we recall God's promise of a savior through that nation?

Just as in springtime, hope surfaces in a tiny shoot. So also, God's divine mercy shoots out in the Root of Jesse. His very name proclaims that he is no ordinary springtime blossom. Jesse was the father of Great David. Who was great David's greater son? Jesus! The Root of Jesse is the eternal Son of God. Amidst the destruction of Israel's rebellion, among the devastation of our sin, the Root of Jesse is raised as a banner of peace and hope. Just as the Israelites of old, like the Greeks of Jesus' day, like the Gentiles in Paul's era, we rally to the Root of Jesse. We rally to him because 1) He judges like no other; 2) we rally to the Root of Jesse because he gives peace like no other.

It doesn't matter how many times we study the history of Israel; it's always strange to hear of Israel's downfall, isn't it? How could a nation springing from faithful Abraham have ended so tragically? What happened to the solid-as-oak leaders like Joshua son of Nun or David the son of Jesse? Those solid oaks were strangled by scraggly, knotty trees. The leaders of Israel were willing to trade the prosperity of the Lord's way for the poverty of idolatry. Isaiah describes Israel's rebellion in the first ten chapters. He writes, “Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts...Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness.” With these words Isaiah tells us that the mighty oaks were long gone.

A knotty tree requires a sharp ax. That's exactly how God used the Assyrians against Israel. Isaiah's prophecy made it clear—the ruthless nation from the North was to be God's hand of judgment on rebellious Israel. With one sweep of the forester's ax Israel was cut down—Assyria took them from their land.

Have you ever seen a forest that has been clear-cut? Better yet, have you seen any pictures from the forest fires of the past summer? It's unbelievable to see a thick forest reduced to a barren field of charred stumps. Even more amazing is the picture of that same forest in the following spring: from those charred remains sprout new shoots. Hope springs from the hopeless.

What a beautiful picture of God's gracious promise here in Isaiah. We know from studying Israel's history that God never leaves them without hope. From the hopeless picture of fallen Israel, Isaiah writes, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit." This carried with it a promise of one to restore Israel physically. More importantly, it was a promise of one to restore Israel spiritually. No longer was God going to allow leaders to misguide Israel. No, the Root of Jesse was to stand in stark contrast to the previous leaders of Israel. With the Spirit of the Lord resting on him he was to judge like no other—with righteousness and faithfulness. "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." No longer could Israel offer a bribe saying, "I'm a son of Abraham." The filthy rich were leveled with the dirt poor. Israel's evil ways wouldn't cut it anymore. They were going to find out that the Root of Jesse judges like no other.

Did you notice something? Isaiah wasn't talking about Israel exclusively, was he? He mentioned the whole earth. All of a sudden you and I are thrown into the realm of this just judge's judgment. Where do we stand? Suddenly Israel's rebellion is our rebellion. We've erected gods of camouflage and gunpowder and steel when we placed our confidence in the most powerful military in the world. At times we've gained false confidence in saying we are sons and daughters of the WELS. We've led people down wrong paths when we judged by what our eyes and ears perceived. Advent is a season where we look forward to Jesus' return as our judge. However, in light of Isaiah's words we are forced to ask, "Where do we stand in his judgement?" Is the ax sharpened and ready to chop us down?

We can never look ahead to Jesus' return without considering his first appearance on earth. In a few weeks when we peer into the manger of Bethlehem, we will see much more than a little baby. We will see our substitute. The baby who grew up to resist idolatry in the wilderness was doing it in our place. The man who saw people's faith and not their poverty was filling in for us. The Son of God became the Son of David that we might be sons of God. Jesus replaced our failures with his perfection.

Today when we look at the Root of Jesse in Isaiah's prophecy we see much more than a twig. We see Calvary's Tree. There, our and Israel's rebellions were punished. Jesus' perfect substitution is where we stand in this judge's judgment. Let's rally to the Root of Jesse who judges like no other.

What a contrast Isaiah prophesies! On the one hand, he foretold the judgment of destruction the kings would bring on Israel. On the other hand, he foretold the judgment of peace the Root of Jesse would bring. Can you imagine how that must have resonated in the minds of Israel's faithful? Amid such evil and chaos was a promise of peace. Certainly this was a call to Rally to the Root of Jesse. It was obvious that he would give peace like no other.

Like the nostalgia that fills our minds when we recall childhood Christmas memories, the Israelites recalled the days of King David's line. That had to be the golden era for the kingdom of Israel. David's army was unstoppable. Solomon's wealth and wisdom were indescribable. During that time Israel knew peace, didn't they? But the mere memory of it was a painful reminder that it was a short-lived peace—physically and spiritually. Gone were the days of military dominance and temple prominence. Israel experienced peace, but never a peace like Isaiah prophesied with these strange words: "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."

Toward the end of summer we took our son to the Milwaukee County Zoo. We saw all the animals including some of those listed here. The way the zoo is set up, the leopards and lions are housed near the antelope and deer. However, did you notice I said *near*? Between them is a wide and deep canal. Along with that is a large fence. It doesn't take much to figure out that those are there to prevent the antelope from becoming lunch. So what in the world is Isaiah talking about? How can predator and prey live together in harmony? As with many beautiful pictures, if we look too closely it becomes blurry. The same is true with the picture Isaiah paints with these words. We might ask, "Is it a picture of a world without wars? Is it a modern nation of Israel? Is it an earthly Christian utopia?"

In a couple of weeks we will again hear the angels explain this so well in their heavenly song: "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men on whom his favor rests." They were announcing the birth of the one who would bring peace between God and people. As Isaiah writes later in chapter 53, "He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him, and by his wounds we are healed." Again we see the Root of Jesse held up as a banner for all nations. In him is the ultimate peace—pictured by predators and prey living together!

Because of his Jesus' first advent we look to his Second Advent with joy. We eagerly anticipate the glorious sight on God's holy mountain, as people of all nations rally to the Root of Jesse. Won't it be great to talk with brothers and sisters in Christ from nations who consider us enemies? What a wonderful experience it will be to sing alongside those brothers and sisters we might have feared! How's it going to feel when patriarchs like Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob put their arms around us and welcome us Gentiles as brothers and sisters? That is the peace promised in the Root of Jesse—it's a peace like no other.

As we look out our windows and see lifeless branches; as we walk by mounds of dirt in our yards that look more like graves than flower beds; as some of us look forward to the first big snow—the last thing the winter season brings to mind is a tiny green shoot. However, when we look at the changing season of the church year, it's a different story. Advent calls to mind the shoot promised to Israel of old and to Christians today. Whether we are celebrating his first coming that brought peace between God and us; or looking ahead to the day we fully experience the peace of his just judgment at his Second Coming—We rally to the Root of Jesse. Amen.