

“From Out of the Stump”

Isaiah 11:1-10; Matthew 3:1-12

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The glow of a Christmas tree trimmed with angels and flags is bringing more than just holiday cheer to workers at the smoking ruins of the World Trade Center -- it's making life bearable again.

“If you work down here everyday, you need something like this to bring a smile back to your face,” said 35-year-old construction worker Don Foley.

Hundreds of workers at ground zero took a momentary break Friday night to watch the lighting ceremony of the 30-foot tree and sing Christmas carols.

The tree was topped with an American flag and adorned with thousands of angels bearing the names of the more than 3,000 people killed or missing on Sept. 11. It was lit by Mayor Rudolph Giuliani with help from children of the victims. [Associated Press]

Well, Sally and I had our annual argument about the Christmas tree. We seem always to have a difference of opinion about when the tree actually ought to go up. “When are we gonna get the tree?” Sally starts asking about mid-August. “Soon,” I would say, putting the process off as long as possible.

One of our very first trees in Milwaukee was purchased in an empty lot from a fly-by-night organization on Lisbon Avenue. We went there in the dark (the worst time to buy a Christmas tree) and picked one out. I remember that it was bitterly cold out that night as it is most December nights in our hemisphere and latitude. The lot was poorly lit, for good reason as it turns out. The fellow came out of a camping trailer to help us.

“That one,” I said. “OK,” he said. Need some twine.” I said “Yes” not really knowing what to do with it. He helped me get it on top of our car, twine wrapped through the windows of the car. Good thing I was a Boy Scout. I put a solid bowline hitch on one end and then a taut-line hitch on the other.

“Do you take checks?” I asked. “Yep! Just make it out to cash.” It took me a while to understand that and I thought of asking if he was any relation to Johnny. But I didn't. I have always wished I had. The French call that *esprit de l'escalier*—something you think to say afterwards that you wish you had the forethought to say at the time. It means literally, “staircase wit,” which means it's something you thought to say while heading down the stairs and out the door.

Our luck with Christmas trees has not always been very good. One we had in Chicago was put up in record time, all lighted and decorated. Erin was about two years old and she wondered as she wandered at this gloriously lighted bush in our living room. We went to bed pretty satisfied with ourselves, only to wake up in the morning with the whole thing laying on one side in a thoroughly pathetic display of Christmas spirit. Most of our trees just die early and that's the real problem. Christmas trees are dead on arrival, aren't they? They're killed in the forest or in the Christmas tree farm where they grew up and then they sit on a truck for a couple of weeks, and on a lot for a few more. You may even find some that look like they've been spray painted green.

This year the tree is a glorious one that our daughter Erin and her son Marcos and I bought at the Flower Lady in Wauwatosa. It is about seven feet tall and very full. After much wrangling with the tree and with each other, we got the tree in its base and put some water in it. By next morning the water had not gone down one millimeter. Not a good sign. I'd forgotten to saw the bottom off and I didn't really want to go to the trouble of taking it all down again, taking it outside, sawing the bottom off with my rusty old hand saw and putting it back again. So, Ryan and I drilled holes in the base of it just under the water line, hoping that would help.

Last I checked, the water line held its own, and there are enough needles on the floor to pad baby Jesus' manger.

The Christmas tree thing that we do is all about keeping a dead thing alive for a few weeks in our living room hoping beyond hope that it won't be a fire hazard when we sit under it and open our presents. We swear every year to get a fake one. Next year, we keep saying. Like we always say about the Chicago Cubs. Next year.

The prophecy of Isaiah meets me just at this point of wrestling with this Christmas tree. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse."

Isaiah spoke those lines just when the great lineage of the house of David was in vast destruction and serious decline. The northern kingdom called Israel had already fallen and the southern kingdom, Jerusalem itself, was under attack by the great Assyrian army coming with a deadly power from the north.

Isaiah prophesied that Jerusalem itself would soon fall. And it so did. The house of David was reduced to a stump. Think of all those stumps in the Christmas tree farms of Wisconsin bereft of life. Memories of former days of life.

What happened was natural, of course. Trees cut off from their roots die. They may look all right for quite a long time, but in the end they collapse. We see it each year with our Christmas trees, don't we—trees that are so fragrant and green when we bring them into the house soon grow dry and brittle, the needles falling off to choke our vacuums. We enjoy them for a while, and then they are cut up and tossed into the fire. And like all plants, they die because they have no roots. No matter how diligently we keep water in the stand, the

truth of the matter is that the tree is already dead when we bring it inside.

The prophet Isaiah used the image of a tree to say something about the Messiah who is to come. Isaiah's image was a powerful one, so powerful that it was used by John the Baptist, by Jesus himself, by the Apostle Paul and then by the church.

But just now in the history of Israel, the only Biblical symbol is a stump of a tree. The stump of a once great tree. The tree of the house of David, once fragrant as a summer's afternoon and strong against all storms that would rage against it. But the house of David had lost its way. It trusted too much in its chariots and the multitude of its warriors to solve all problems foreign and domestic. It trusted too much in its foreign alliances and not enough on God. It trusted not enough on the God who commands justice and integrity and humility and mercy and forgiveness. The house and lineage of David had forgotten God and had been reduced to a stump by foreign powers and armies. A tree that does not yield the fruit of justice and righteousness and mercy and love will be cut down.

In the chapter before the one we read this morning, Isaiah had spoken of God's judgment as the felling of a great forest. But out of such inconceivable defeat will come a renewed dependance upon God who moves us toward great acts of mercy and loving-kindness. Out of defeat comes a renewed understanding of our right relationship with God.

And along comes John, very much in the prophetic tradition of Isaiah, with his camel's hair coat and leather belt around his waist eating locusts and wild honey. Why hasn't locusts and wild honey caught on as a nice Christmas treat along with the almond cookies and apple pies? It would certainly be low in fat and cholesterol and might be crunchy and oddly sweet. Certainly more tasty than some of the fruitcakes I've tasted over the years. But not as tasty as, say, French silk pie. But I digress.

Here comes crazy John calling us toward repentance and toward the forgiveness of sins. It may well be that those who have been utterly defeated can believe that locusts and wild honey might be in any way tasty and only the broken of spirit can consider the possibility of repentance. I hope that such is not the case, but I fear that it is.

In America these days we are in a mood of some victory. We've got the Taliban on the run and may well kill or capture the leadership who caused the destruction of September 11th. But there is a reality that lies behind such destruction. There is still a world poverty that breeds resentment that we're going to have to deal with at some point.

In the 1960s, the richest fifth of the world's population had a total income 30 times as great as the poorest fifth's; in 1998 the ratio was 74 to 1. In 1965, the real gross domestic product of Chad, a little African country southwest of Egypt and south of Libya, was one-fifteenth of the United States'; in 1990, one-fiftieth!

This is the reality that the prophets call us to pay attention to. Deal with the terror network that planned and executed the bombing, but also pay attention to world poverty, or

another band of self-promoters will take advantage of the steaming resentment of the world's most desperately poor.

Unto us was born, in the deepest poverty, a savior, who is Christ the Lord. That, finally, is our story. Do not trust in your chariots and the multitude of your warriors. Love your enemies and be willing to try to understand their desperation. And out of that understanding shall come real peace.

I don't pretend to believe for one moment that this is an easy teaching. Not easy for me to preach and not easy for you to hear I'm sure. But it is the central message of our Gospel whether we are willing to hear it or not.

This Advent season that we celebrate is a season of hope against hope. And it suggests that out of dead things comes new life, if we are but willing to face the things of death and celebrate that which makes for true life and a truly sustainable peace.

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