

WHAT SHALL WE CALL HIM?
The O Antiphons: 2. "O Flower of Jesse's Stem"
Isaiah 11:1-19
December 6, 2015, Second Sunday in Advent
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Last week we began this Advent sermon Series on the general title, "What Shall We Call him?" That question stems in part from the ancient O Antiphons that the early church began chanting in the 4th—5th centuries picking up words for the Jewish Messiah from the Old Testament and primarily the prophet Isaiah. Words like O Emmanuel which was our topic last week or "O Root of Jesse" today's topic, or next week "O Wisdom" others include "O Adonai" (Lord), "O Key of David," "O Radiant Dawn," and "O Ruler of the nations."

Each of the Antiphons begins with an invocation of the expected Messiah: *O Root of Jesse, rising as a sign for all the peoples*; followed by praise of him, *before you earthly rulers will keep silent and nations give you honor*; each ends with a petition for God's people, relevant to the title by which he is addressed and the cry for him to "Come." *Come, quickly to deliver us.*

Today the antiphon is "O Root of Jesse." Who is this Jesse and where did Isaiah get the idea of a stem coming out of Jesse or a branch from the root of Jesse? Some of you may have in your Advent tradition from another church or from your home Advent daily services an Advent calendar that is called "A Jesse Tree." Some of them are arranged with many branches on a very green flannel board or a poster on a wall each day a new homemade ornament is added that tells the story of God's involvement with humanity from creation to Jesus's birth. The first day you might have a bright yellow sun representing creation and another day a boy representing Cain or Able and then an ark for the flood and so on down through the 25 days or so of Advent and right up to Christmas Day with a star at the top of the tree.

It's called a Jesse tree because the wording is taken from Isaiah 11 our scripture of the morning. Jesse was the father of David the greatest king in Israel's history. During a period of political crisis the people of God would cry out for a leader like David to come and save them. Isaiah is living in a time of crisis. As was mentioned last week the time is around 733 B.C. and the current king of Judah was Ahaz who was the son of Jotham who was the son of Uzziah.

The big crisis was that the northern nation of Israel, this is 200 years after the splitting of Israel into 2 nations, Israel in the north and Judah in the south, had aligned with a tribe in Damascus who wanted to go to war with the Assyrians. They wanted Judah and Ahaz to join them in an alliance which God told Ahaz through the prophet Isaiah would end in disaster for Ahaz and Judah. Do you trust your political instincts or do you trust in God was the issue?

Ahaz refuses the advice from Isaiah to seek a sign from God but instead puts his trust in an alliance that leads to his downfall. Ahaz was a king in the line of David from the lineage of Jesse but unlike his grandfather Uzziah he did not walk in the ways of the Lord. Remember you're your Old Testament history how when King Uzziah died the people mourned for a year the death

of a great king. The prophecy of Isaiah begins the year that Uzziah died. Young Isaiah maybe in his late teens or early twenties goes up with his contemporaries to pray and to ask God for guidance. The temple was a smoky place with candles everywhere and the priest have incense burning to give a pleasant odor from all the animal sacrifice that went on there. He goes to the temple in Jerusalem to pray and this is what he saw.

Fred Buechner puts it this way, “Remember there were banks of candles flickering in the distance and clouds of incense thickening the air with holiness and stinging the eyes, and high above him, as if it had always been there but was only now seen for what it was, there was the Mystery Itself whose gown was the incense and the candles a dusting of gold at the hem. There were winged creatures shouting back and forth the way excited children shout to each other when dusk calls them home, and the whole vast, reeking place started to shake beneath his feet like a wagon going over cobble stones, and he cried out, ‘O God, I am done for! I am foul of mouth and the member of a foul mouthed race. With my own two eyes I have seen him. I’m a goner and sunk.’ Then one of the winged things touched his mouth with fire and said, ‘There, it will be all right now,’ and the Mystery Itself said, “Who will it be?’ And with charred lips he said, ‘Me,’ and the Mystery Itself said, ‘Go.’

“Mystery said, ‘Go tell them the word of God till you are blue in the face and go show the blind heaven till you drop in your tracks because they’d sooner eat ground glass than swallow the bitter pill that puts roses in the cheeks and gleam in the eye. Go do it.’ And that is what the prophet does for a living, and starting from the year that King Uzziah died when he saw and heard all these things, Isaiah went and did it.” (Listening to Your Life, Frederick Buechner, pg. 263)

Now, maybe twenty years later he has seen what happens when people don’t have good leadership and when the king fails to walk in the ways of the Lord or even in the ways of their most immediate ancestors. So, Isaiah is calling for a messianic king to come from the stump of Jesse, a branch to sprout from the root of Jesse. He is calling for a Davidic for sure, a descendent of mighty King David from Jesse’s loins, a mighty king who will restore justice and God’s word to Judah and the people of God.

He is hopeful that a king of peace will arrive, a second David will emerge and this king will come from the city of David’s birth, Bethlehem. And the spirit of the Lord will rest on him and he will possess the six great virtues that every great king needs: wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. And each of those virtues come because the “Spirit of the Lord” rest on this person.

Is it any wonder that the early church adopted these passages from Isaiah because they heard echoes in this prophecy in the life of Jesus? Remember in John’s gospel Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, is invited to spend a day with Jesus? At the end of the day he goes and finds his brother Peter and says, “We have found the Messiah.” There is no clue in John’s gospel as to what Jesus said to Andrew and the others that day that made them think that he was the Messiah. But apparently that is what happened. They must have seen the spirit of the Lord upon him. They had

to have heard and seen a little bit at least of the wisdom and understanding, the counsel and might, and the knowledge and fear or love is a better way to say that, of the Lord.

They lived in troubled time and so are we living in troubling times. Does a week go by without another “Breaking News” story of a shooting or a terrorist threat? Nora O’Donnell on CBS Morning News reported that as she has traveled in the past few days from New York to Washington to Los Angeles she senses unrest among people, nervousness about their own safety and what might happen next.

It is as though a darkness has settled over us and we don’t know what to do about it? How do we address the violence in this country? How do we address the sense of insecurity and unrest? No one seems to know. Politicians either want us to have more guns or less guns, they either want to invade our privacy with listening devices or they don’t want to listen and don’t think anyone should take our freedom of privacy away; they either think that we should lock up the mentally ill but aren’t sure what or who they are or they want better out-patient care.

But what do you do about the darkness? Our newspapers and online papers are filled with darkness. Our best contemporary literature is about darkness. Darkness fills the skies over our own cities as well as the cities of our enemies. And in our single lives, we know about darkness too. If we are people who pray, darkness is apt to be a lot about what the prayers are about. If we are people who do not pray, it is apt to be darkness in one form or another that has shut our mouths.

Don’t we need to listen to the prophet Isaiah who said twenty-seven years ago give or take a few hundred, “The people who walk in darkness have seen a great light.” Isn’t it the message of Isaiah calling to us down through the ages that gives us hope that we have the answer to the darkness? The end of the Isaiah reading for this morning has what some call “the Peaceable Kingdom” where enemies learn to co-habitat together. The wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the young goat, the calf and the lion, the cow and the bear will graze together. And a little child shall lead them.

Isaiah is picturing a culture in his day that moves from a culture of war to a culture of peace. And it begins with a stump. Out of something that appears dead, out of something that has been something but no longer is anything, out of those dead looking pieces of wood comes ... something new. New life appears. Have you ever seen that? Have you ever seen it in your backyard or a walk in the woods, through Botanical Gardens right here in Athens?

So what might be the dead stump in your life? Is there any possibility that new life can emerge from that stump? Will it happen on its own or with a little help from you? Probably not. Why not? Because it is God who ushers in the NEW life era. God brings it forth. This is a new act of creation that only God can accomplish. We can watch, we can wait, we can pray for it to happen, but this is a God thing.

Who hasn’t heard a little child ask their mother, “When is Christmas coming?” Who doesn’t count the days until Christmas? When will the root of Jesse sprout a sprig of hope?

The answer to this question began in the heart and mind of God in the quiet, unbroken calm of eternity. The world began, the human race stumbled and fell, kings and princes rose into glory and fell into dust—Jesse's stump was barren ... and then one day God placed the Child in a manger and changed the course of the world. This Child is our hope, in him is our faith.

As Christmas comes now, we must know that he alone can make the world a better world. Christ is the world's Savior. Christ alone can reply to the question of our childlike hearts, "When will Christmas come?" This is the reassuring answer: It came with Jesus' birth.