

"Promise and Fulfillment"

Isaiah 11:1-6; Romans 15:5-13

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

November 30, 2014 – 1st Sunday of Advent – Rev. Ronald Botts

On February 4, 1902, a child was born in Detroit. No one knew then of the history this small child would make as a man. No one could have imagined such a future.

As a boy he had a hard time in school and never really enjoyed it. He was good with his hands, though, and loved to tinker with machinery. After graduation from high school he went to work on the family farm and successfully ran it, despite his young age.

A turning point in his life may have been when he was almost killed in a farm accident. This near fatal occurrence caused him to develop a changed attitude about risk. He saw that one could be killed in the mundane activities of life almost as readily as those which were more dangerous. While some thought him a bit reckless, he considered it just living within the odds.

He liked farming, but felt he should give the broader world a try before settling in for the rest of his life. So he entered the Army flying school in 1924 but, after graduating, the Army didn't offer him a commission. Though disappointed, he took a job flying mail. Those short-hop flights showed him that cargo might be transported by such means regularly, even at great distances. That started his career.

A few years later when Charles Lindbergh landed in Paris he was hailed for his accomplishment on both sides of the Atlantic. Who would have thought at his birth that his name would become known around the world, and his exploits still cited yet today.

Nor could the people of Judah have imagined the way in which a prophesy of Isaiah would have been fulfilled when he spoke, "For unto us a child is born; to us a son is given."

The story of Christmas is the story of a child and how the hopes and dreams of humanity were fulfilled in this birth of an infant. The Gospels weave together the story of a mother and father, singled out for God's favor. From this family comes one who was destined to change the course of the world.

The imagery of childhood is prominently found in the ancient writings, and nowhere more than in the prophet Isaiah. Our first lesson for today is one of them.

"A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Isaiah describes a time of exile, after the fall of the monarchy in the line of David. The people are ruled by foreigners and times are hard. There is little optimism, for there is scant likelihood that a change of circumstances is imminent.

Hope may not be entirely gone, however, but it is focused on the future when the line of kings in the House of David will be restored. It's in the looking back and the looking forward that the Hebrew people find their ability to endure the present.

We've been in such uncomfortable periods, too. We understand how a slim thread of hope sometimes keeps us going when we want to stop and give up. So it was for our spiritual ancestors. Prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel gave them hope that a new day would dawn, when the potential of the Israelites would be finally and fully realized. Someday things would be vastly different.

"A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." This is figurative language that compares the rule of the House of David to a tree that has been cut down. The stump is all that is left of this proud family that has given generations of leadership to the nation. It is pictured as the "stump of Jesse" because Jesse is the father of David.

I have a neighbor who hired a couple of young fellows to do some yard work for him. In the process of removing overgrown vegetation, they also lopped off all the branches of a prized ornamental bush. In fact, they did such a thorough job that you could hardly see any remnants of the once magnificent plant, except for a little crown right at the soil line. Well, my friend was dismayed but finally reconciled himself to the fact that his beautiful bush was gone and that he would have to start over again with a replacement.

It was too late in the fall to replant, so my neighbor put it off for the spring. A surprising thing happened, though, with the first warm days of March: a few green stems showed at the place in the ground where the bush had been. And they grew all spring and summer off those sturdy roots that once fed the beloved ornamental. What looked dead now bloomed again. This summer it filled out even more and, in fact, the bush never looked better.

That's the imagery here. "A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." The lineage of the kingship that goes back to David appears to be over and done with, but Isaiah predicts that its life force is not snuffed out. When conditions are right, a new beginning will be made; and not just any beginning, but a grand and glorious one. The past will pale by comparison.

What follows then in the text are the attributes of the ideal king as envisioned by Isaiah. "The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth..."

What will it be like to live under the reign of this king? It will be a time of unprecedented peace, where the natural enemies of the past will be no longer. Isaiah uses poetic language: "The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."

This passage is not to be taken literally. It is the idyllic expressed to the extreme, but it's symbolic of the great changes that will be ushered in by this new king. It will not be a reign like any other, but different in kind and quality from all other kings. It will be a marked change from the past history.

Well, Isaiah never lived long enough to see this new king firsthand. Hundreds of years would go by and still the one he foretold was nowhere to be found. Yet, the words of Isaiah were not forgotten. In fact, they are paraphrased in our other reading for the morning, in the letter of Paul to the church at Rome.

Here the apostle connects those words not to a king in the common understanding of that title, but to Jesus the anointed one of God, This is why Luke's nativity narrative makes such a point of emphasizing that Joseph belonged to the House and line of David, for this was a fulfillment of the ancient prophesy. And this king would be like no other as he would not simply bring a temporal kingdom, but one that was spiritual and eternal. Truly Jesus was understood as both the promise and fulfillment.

I came across this quote recently. Let me share it with you because I think it's relevant here. "Every child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity. Children are the most wholesome part of the race...for they are the freshest from the hand of God. When God wants a great work done in the world or a great wrong righted, he goes about it in an unusual way... God has a helpless baby born, perhaps in a simple home of an obscure mother. And then God puts the idea into the mother's heart, and she puts it in the baby's mind, and then God waits. The greatest forces in the world are babies."

These words come from the accidental theologian Herbert Hoover, and they certainly hold true in regard to both scriptures today. In that small child of Bethlehem's manger we discover anew God's promise to a waiting and needy world. In him, civilization is changed. In him, lives find their fulfillment. In him is the key to God's intention for your life and mine.

It's no wonder then that Christmas is a time of true celebration. And it begins in our hearts and souls this very day, this first Sunday of Advent, in this season of promise and fulfillment.