

At that time you will say

Isaiah 11, 12

December 16, 2012

We have an apple tree in our backyard. Actually, we had an apple tree in our backyard. It was a old, big apple tree, with heavy limbs and wide spreading branches. It was rather overgrown and too thickly stemmed, so I have pruned it regularly over the years, though we didn't spray it or otherwise try to cultivate the tree for apple production.

But it did produce apples, some years more than others, small, tart, but good tasting apples, not large enough or free enough of blemishes to eat, but Lynne sometimes made applesauce from them or pies.

And in the early spring -- oh my! -- in the spring it blossomed, small pink bulbs opening up into beautiful white flowers all over that big tree! For a few weeks each spring, depending on the temperature and the winds and the rain, our apple tree was the stunning star of our backyard, and, indeed, of all the neighboring backyards.

But now it's gone. It was a big tree, with a thick, round trunk, but the trunk had become divided in the middle, the wood of the two halves of the main trunk beginning to pull away from each other. And one summer, four or five years ago, in a big windstorm, half the tree blew down. I wasn't home -- I don't remember why now, it may have been during the time I was in New Orleans with a mission team from the church -- but Lynne hired a man to come and cut up the half of the tree that had fallen.

But half remained, and that half an apple tree continued to bloom beautifully in the spring and produce apples in the fall. We still enjoyed our apple tree ... until two summers ago. It had been very wet, the ground was saturated with moisture, and in a strong wind, the remaining half of our apple tree just keeled over and lay prostrate on the ground. I was home this time and I cut up the tree and now all that's left is a stump, actually two half stumps, sad reminders of the beautiful old apple tree that once graced our backyard.

Except that from half the stump, little shoots began to grow! A half a dozen, a dozen, tiny little branches began sprouting from the seemingly lifeless stump. I pruned most of them back and left a single new shoot to grow and now it rises thirty inches above the stump and at its base is the thickness of my little finger. Out of the stump of our old apple tree, a new tree is growing!

*Like a branch that sprouts from a stump,
someone from David's family will someday be king.*

That's what the prophet Isaiah said to the people of Israel: "Like a branch that sprouts from a stump." Just like our apple tree.

Because Israel had become a stump. Only a lifeless stump remained of what their nation, their people, their king, had once been. When David was king and when his son, Solomon, was king, their nation had been glorious. In those days, God blessed had them with wealth and renown, and with peace. The people of Israel enjoyed freedom, for a time, from the constant attacks of contentious neighbors and overbearing empires. In fact, during Solomon's rule, Israel was one of the leading nations of the known world. Other nations came to them to offer tribute and praise and to ask for counsel.

But after Solomon's death, the tree that had been Israel was split in two, into the northern kingdom of Israel, and the southern kingdom of Judah. The divided kingdoms fought with each other and both were harassed by Egypt from the south and by Assyria and Babylon from the north. And one day, half the tree, the northern kingdom of Israel, came down, chopped down and cut up by the armies of Assyria, never to be again.

The other half of the tree, the other half of the kingdom, Judah, remained, still producing some brief moments of glory, brief moments of hope especially under the leadership of King Hezekiah and King Josiah, hope that Israel might still fulfill the promise of its call by God to be a light to the nations. But the people of Judah, like their brothers and sisters in Israel, turned their backs to God. They didn't know or honor their Lord, and they too were chopped down and cut up, this time by proud and mighty Babylon, and all that remained of Israel was a lifeless stump, only relics and memories of what once was, only a quickly fading vision of what might have been.

But someday!

The voice of the Lord whispered to the people of Israel through the voice of Isaiah: "Someday!"

*Like a branch that sprouts from a stump,
someone from David's family will someday be king.*

Someday! Someday, a king will rise from the family of David to rule again and he will rule with justice and honesty and fairness and faithfulness. He will know and honor the Lord, and the whole land will be filled with people who know and honor the Lord.

And on that day, at that time, someday, the poor and needy will be treated fairly. All will get the justice they deserve.

And on that day, at that time, someday, there will be peace in the land. Leopards will lie down with young goats. Wolves will rest with lambs. There will be no more enmity and no one, old or young, will need to be afraid any more because nothing any more will harm them.

And on that day, at that time, someday, God will bring all his people home, bring them back from the places to which they have been scattered, bring them home to the land of promise just as he once brought them out of Egypt to the land of promise.

On that day, at that time, someday, Israel and Judah will come together again, together they will be the Lord's beautiful tree, and the nations of the world will look to them for advice, and through them all the nations of the world will come together .

On that day. At that time. Someday. And when that day comes, at that time, Isaiah told the people of Israel, you will say: "Thank you, Lord!"

You were angry with me, but now you have stopped being angry and have given me comfort. Thank you, Lord!

On that day. At that time. Someday. We are waiting for that day!

We are waiting for the day when the poor and needy will be treated fairly, when the great divide between rich and poor will be gone, when all will have enough, when all will enjoy freedom and opportunity and all the blessings of this life.

We are waiting for the day when peace will cover the face of the earth, when the people of this earth will know and fear God, when the people of this earth will know and love the Lord their God, when threat and intimidation and violence will be unknown, when little children will never be again harmed, when little children will never again have to be afraid. We are waiting for that day!

We are waiting for the day when we will be brought together, you and I and all of us, when all the peoples of this world will be brought together in peace, when we will live together in loving community, looking out for each other, protecting each other, providing for each other, blessing each other, blessing God by the ways we bless each other.

We are waiting for that day! That's what Advent is about. Advent is about waiting. Advent is about waiting for that day. Advent teaches us how to wait, but Advent reminds us too what we are waiting for! And when that day comes, at that time, we will say: "Thank you, Lord!"

But what do we say today? What do we say with the shocking murder of twenty elementary school children in Newtown, Connecticut, and the heart-breaking discovery of the bodies of two Evansdale cousins fresh in our minds?

What do we say today? Do we have nothing to say and nothing to do but wait? Just grit our teeth and hang on and hope for the best and bide our time and wait?

Wait for the day to come? Wait for the day to come when nothing harmful will take place on the Lord's holy mountain? Wait for the day to come when no little child will come to harm any more? Wait for the day to come when when we will at last be able to say, "Thank you, Lord?"

Isaiah tells us what to say, not just at that time, not just someday, but today. Listen!

*At that time you will say,
"I thank you, Lord!
You were angry with me,
but you stopped being angry
and gave me comfort.
I trust you to save me, Lord God,
and I won't be afraid.*

Do you hear the time shift? At that time, I will say, "Thank you Lord," but because I know that day is coming, and because I know the One who will bring it, today I say, "I trust you to save me, Lord, and I won't be afraid."

On that day, at that time, someday, God's peaceable kingdom will be, but today we put our trust in the One who will save us and we will not be afraid.

Listen!

*At that time you will say,
"Our Lord, we are thankful,
and we worship only you.
We will tell the nations
how glorious you are
and what you have done.*

At that time, we will say, "Lord, we are thankful," but because we know that day is coming, and because we know that it is you, Lord, who will bring that day into being, today, today we will tell the nations of your glory!

On that day, at that time, someday, the glory of the Lord will cover the face of the earth, but today, today we shout "Glory to God in the highest" and we proclaim the good news of the glory of the One who loves us and saves us and shows us another way.

On that day, at that time, someday, when God brings to be the day of peace and gladness, we will all say, "Thank you, Lord!" But, in the meantime, today, in the midst of this world as it is, and in the face of our grief, we say: "We trust you to save us, Lord. We will not be afraid, and we will tell the world that you are here."

Listen!

*Sing, people of Zion!
Celebrate the greatness
of the holy Lord of Israel.
God is here to help you.*

God is here to help you! God is here, today, right now, and that's why we sing!

Someday a branch will sprout from the stump. Someday God's peaceable kingdom will be not just a vision, but a reality. Someday this world will enjoy the blessings of shalom, God's peace. But today, right now, know this: God is here. God is here to help you!

We have something to say today. We have something to sing about today. So sing! Sing, people of God! Sing and celebrate the greatness of your holy Lord!