

Advent 2 2013

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 19-19;

Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

There's a wonderful pile of tree just outside the church bordered by the office, the parking lot, and the lanai. My understanding is that it was declared dead at one point. I think you can still look at a trunk or two and see the hollowness. A few people proposed that it was dangerous and should be cut down and out. The some beautiful and local plants and trees could be planted and the little plot of space would once again look as it should look. By the way, children wouldn't get hurt in case a branch broke or they fell off.

The tree was supposedly dying and should be cut away to a stump. By the time I got here there were indeed a couple of thick limbs that were hollow and posed a danger, so we did cut them off. I think if you look, you might still be able to see where that happened.

But the tree is still there. It not only is full of tree life, with green leaves and new branches, but sometimes it's full of human life, when children climb into it to look down on the world around them.

The tree was given a chance and it grew into life. Some folks in the congregation still had hope for its growth and usefulness. Granted, it has an incredibly deformed trunk but it is a symbol of the life that can grow out of something seemingly dead. Kind of like the stump of the tree of Jessie, from which the life of Jesus came after the stump – the family tree – continued to grow and bring life.

There is a sculpture in Toronto that depicts a bench with a homeless figure lying on it, wrapped in a blanket so you can barely see his face. Two prominent churches in Toronto and New York City rejected it; they didn't want it on their property. Finally a Jesuit institution in Toronto accepted it and installed it. The statue is called Homeless Jesus. This depiction of Jesus, who actually was homeless, was just too radical and confrontational for Christian communities who regularly use a cross with a body nailed to it as a symbol of this same Jesus. Go figure.

It's hard to think about the life wrapped up by the blanket – especially on our own streets. We see them on the sidewalks of Waikiki, on the bus stop benches around the city, in our parks, and even on the grounds of Iolani Palace. It's much easier for us to feel disgust or embarrassment and to look the other way and keep walking. It's much easier to blame the system and the lack of facilities and the refusal of some to "turn themselves in" to those facilities for all that we see and hear. And then we can move on.

Has anyone of us ever stopped to listen to the men and women who rant and rave on our streets? What are they actually saying and what are they yelling about? Do we take the time to listen to them – not engage necessarily – but stop to just listen to what it is they're saying – even if from what we might consider a safe distance? Sure – their words are probably coming out of some mental illness. We know that's a major issue with many of our street people. But still – what is it that they're talking and yelling about? Might listening to them give us any clues to who they are as people?

These are current day symbols of the hope that can be offered to us and through us in the death of a tree, the visibility of the homeless, and being aware of those we consider the mentally ill.

That tree is a reminder that even out of a seemingly dead big plant – a stump, if you will – can come life – not just any life but a life full of activity, full of new and healthy growth, full of hope and even beauty in its very strange way.

Jesus ended up being one of the most important men in the history of the world. But he was homeless. He was dangerous to the authorities and invisible to those who didn't have time to get involved with his challenges to feed the poor and do all those other things that distract us from the more important things in life. This same homeless man left his followers with the responsibility to feed the poor, clothe the naked, bring water to the thirsty, and care for the vulnerable around us.

The raving and obviously mentally ill man? Good ol' John the Baptist. Why would any of us listen to someone who eats bugs – I'm sure his diet consisted of living protein other than just locusts. God knows what else he was eating. And wearing an animal skin rather than board shorts and a t-shirt? We're not going to stand around and listen to him – he's probably ranting about nonsense and could be dangerous and we really don't want to encourage his behavior. What if we actually heard something that caused us to think about what he was saying in his seeming schizophrenic state?

So we have the disfigured tree, the homeless man on the bench, the raving lunatic who is saying God knows what. The stump of Jesse, Jesus, and John the Baptist.

All of the readings this morning speak to us of hope. That's another thing this Advent season is about: The ability to see and be reminded of the hope that is still possible in a world that continues to suffer in so many ways. Suffering that confronts us every day even in this city of Honolulu and on this island of Oahu. Suffering of the homeless – adults and teens, suffering of those who are the victims of human trafficking and prostitution, suffering of those families that cannot exist on the minimum wages offered by the service industry that is the foundation of our economy in Hawaii, and suffering of animals who have been abandoned or thrown away. The suffering of God's creation.

The hope comes through we who are followers of Jesus Christ. He has entrusted to us the ability to confront the ills that are in front of us, to offer hope to the vulnerable, to be the voice and face of hope to those who are usually invisible to society. We are given this season of Advent by the church to be reminded why it is we're waiting to celebrate the birthday of the baby boy who will bring us a hope that continues to feed us and sustain us. Without it, there would be a hopelessness and despair in our community and in the world that our efforts are probably in vain.

It's not just about the hope that we can offer to the seemingly hopeless. It's also about the hope that each one of us needs in our own lives. It's the promise of light on the other side of the dark valley; it's the promise that we are not alone; it's the hope that we bring to one another when we reach out and support one another, even in those most difficult times. This hope is in stump of Jesse, that almost dead tree that eventually grew to bring us the one we follow and the one in whom we believe. This hope is in the homeless Jesus, who reminds of that even our own leader was homeless. This hope is in John the Baptist, that crazy nomad, who knew who Jesus was the moment he saw him and suddenly wasn't a raving lunatic any more.

If any of us forgets about the hope that grew out of the stump of Jesse, just take a look at that mangled mess of tree that is right outside – the tree that has become a tree of life even out of its hopelessness. And remember that that tree is still there because of the hope that some had for its continued life. We are the instruments of that hope continually brought to us by Jesus. It's in the second flame of the Advent wreath that we are reminded every year of the hope that is brought to us through the birth of the Christ Child.

Amen.

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