

Sam Haisten  
Lay Preacher

This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, “The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I grew up in a neighborhood that had a big hill at the very front of it. There were oak trees at the top of the hill, old ones, with gnarled branches and thick bark that would scrape us up as we played hide and seek on the hill. The neighborhood loved that hill with those trees and twice a year we would all have a campout there, tents pitched under the massive oak trees that stood like sentinels guarding us while we slept. In the center of the trees was a stump, the remnant of a tree cut down long ago for reasons nobody seemed to remember, and for a long time the stump was part of our playground, serving as a table for tea and a stage for the campout talent show. One spring, a small shoot began to grow from a crack in the stump, so we stopped playing on it and started watching as it grew and grew into a very small oak sapling. Eventually parts of the original stump were removed to allow a new tree to grow.

The way to prevent these sprouts, which have the misfortune of technically being called “suckers,” is to seal off a tree stump, usually with chemicals or burning it so it can no longer reproduce. This might sound familiar to the people of Israel. Their enemies had tried hard to seal off the stump of Jesse, but nothing seemed to work. Despite years of pain and suffering, war and slavery, the Israelites carried on. They knew that from their stump a new shoot would spring forth and take root, and that is exactly what happened when Jesus of Nazareth was born.

Do you know how fragile a tree sapling is? They are tiny and delicate, susceptible to the elements and wild animals who might trample it underfoot. What a beautiful metaphor for the infant Christ. Like a sapling, this baby was tiny and delicate and totally reliant on his mother to keep him fed and safe and yet, this baby was also the Messiah, the King of kings and Lord of lords.

It’s hard to imagine this peaceful kingdom Isaiah tells us about, a kingdom where everything and everyone lives in harmony, but that is what Christianity strives for. In the letter to the Romans, Paul encourages the followers of Christ there to strive for harmony with one another so that they can together, with one unified voice, glorify God. Trees are made of many parts: the bark, branches, leaves, and roots; the fruit they grow and the birds' nests they shelter. Despite being made of so many different parts, it is a single tree, connected by a network of roots to all of the trees around it. We are like trees in that way, having different views and opinions, different preferences and dreams, but all coming together to form a whole and connecting with each other to be the unified body of Christ. Trees need water and sunlight to grow strong; without them, they wither. Like trees, we cannot grow without a little extra help, so we thrive when we live in harmony with one another, and we wither when that harmony is disrupted by greed, shame, and

fear. Sin casts shadows over our relationships with each other in the same way that kudzu casts shadows over trees and other plants, blocking the sunlight they need to survive.

John the Baptist said, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.” Take a moment to think about the imagery there; at first it feels rather alarming! In order for the old oak tree to sprout and begin life anew, it first had to be cut down to a stump. Advent is the perfect time for that, to take the ax lying at the root of the tree and begin to regrow from the stump of who we were before. John isn’t preaching a message of condemnation here; he’s preaching one of liberation. He says that in order for us to bear good fruit we have to work constantly to address the sin in our lives, tearing away at the kudzu that creeps in unnoticed and casts shadows on that delicate shoot growing within us and throwing it into the fire. Like kudzu, sin is hard to keep away, but Christ will come in and start pulling those tendrils away from our roots and branches until all that remains is a healthy tree good for growing fruit. Everything he pulls away he casts into the fire, and after the heat of that fire John cools us off with the water of repentance. Without repentance, the sin will return again and again and again, but the act of repenting, which is a common theme during Advent, fertilizes the soil we grow in and staves off the weeds and kudzu that threaten our growth.

The gardeners here will tell us that pruning is hard and constant work. Just when we think it’s done, we find more that needs to be done. Our spiritual pruning is just like this, hard and constant work. It can be scary to prune away the layers of sin in our own lives and like pruning in the garden, can leave us feeling sore. It is easy to wonder what the point of doing it is because it feels endless and like more effort than it’s worth, but it’s not. It is in the work of pruning that we reveal the fertile soil ready to receive the seeds of Christ. In Advent we are invited to prune away our sin and nurture the new growth of the Christ child within ourselves.

The Israelites knew they had some pruning to do and John the Baptist’s message reminded them that if they didn’t, someone else would. The root of Jesse had put forth a sprout, a tiny sapling that would grow into Christ the Savior, and John’s mission was to prepare the way for the Messiah. He began the work of pruning away the overgrowth so that Jesus could finish it on the cross. In the waters of the Jordan River, he baptized penitents and urged them to cast off the vines of sin and wickedness; this is a message that is just as relevant today as it was then.

I moved out of my old neighborhood over a decade ago, but any time I drive by it I see the hill and the ancient oaks standing tall and strong, the young one in the center as if guarded by its older siblings. It still seems miniscule compared to those that surround it, but every time I see it, it is a little bigger. This Advent, I invite you to prune away that which you need to in yourselves and cultivate good soil for Christ to grow in. Allow him to take root within you and in your life and grow stronger each day and “fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.”