

## Out of Seemingly Nothing

Isaiah 11:1-10

Rev. Valerie Fairchild

Let us pray

Lord, come. Speak to us. Help us to hear your message for us today. If I've written anything that is not of you, let it not be received. Amen.

We have been talking about learning to see God at work in our lives. Today, we'll begin with Howard's testimony about ways he now recognizes God's work in his life.

\*Testimony (summary toward end)

Today's scripture reading may have surprised you and you might be wondering where I'm going with this and what it has to do with Christmas. It begins, **“A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.”** (Isaiah 11:1) This is a prophecy about the coming of the Messiah, Jesus the Christ. We may not think too much about Jesus coming from the lineage of Jesse. We think more about the lineage of David, Jesse's son, but this was very important to the Israelites. This was before David became king. The people were waiting for the long-expected Messiah and this prophecy renewed their hope that even while they couldn't see or

understand what God was doing, God was still at work.

To the Israelites, it appeared that the stump, the lineage of Jesse, was dead. This prophecy claimed God was going to bring life out of what appeared to be nothing - hopelessness.

We in the desert have a great illustration for this. We know that when we cut our overgrown gangly desert shrubs down in the spring, they send up new shoots from the stumps and by summer are amazingly good sized and attractive again. New life out of seemingly death.



Chainsaw artists bring life from stumps in the form of great carvings. When Toms Creek UMC needed to remove a dying tree from their front property, chain saw artist Jason Stoner resurrected the tree. He carved the trunk of the now branchless tree into Jesus holding a lamb. Many would have thought the old tree was good for nothing but firewood, but because of the Jason's vision it is now an amazing deeply rooted sculpture.

These images powerfully illustrate today's message. God produces life and amazing beauty out of what to us appears as dead and useless – including our own lives some times. This gives us

hope that sustains us as we remember that even when we can't see what God is up to, He is still at work in the things that worry us.

God took the stump of Jesse and brought forth Jesus and **“The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding...”** (Isaiah 11:2a) God was still at work and the promise was still the promise and the Messiah came bringing just what the world needs. This was the hope the people needed to hear.

The Israelites were reeling from the effects of the disastrous King Ahaz who had become a vassal of the Assyrian ruler. Isaiah brought two-fold hope. In chapter ten, preceding today's reading, Isaiah told the people what God was going to do with the Assyrians who were treating them so horribly. God promised survival of his people. That was immediate hope. Then Isaiah went on to share with them their ultimate hope in the coming of Jesus.

God promises both immediate hope and ultimate hope. Something we all need.

This is real hope, not false hope. False hope is placed in stuff that doesn't last. It is 'sinking sand.' We are talking about genuine hope, 'solid ground' hope. Real hope is not wishful thinking. It is the ultimate belief that when all else fails, our lives remain in the strong and faithful hands of God and God is still on the throne and working in

us and in our world – even when it feels like there is nothing left.

And so, during our challenges and the world problems, we wait. We wait. And waiting is not easy.

Yet out of scripture emerges this picture of Jesus, our ultimate hope. This hope gives us perspective on the threats and worries of life. The things we're dealing with do not have the final word. Our hope is anchored in Jesus. We are invited, and reminded every year as we prepare for Christmas, of this sustaining hope. And we need to remember and need to hold onto this hope when threats and worries rage.

God is at work and God brings life and beauty out of what appears to be nothing. Even when we can't see a way forward, even when we don't know what to do next, when it feels hopeless – God can still resurrect whatever you might think is hopeless.

And what will be the result? Isaiah presented an amazing picture. The wolf and lamb together, the leopard and goat, the calf and lion, all residing together. A child leading them. A cow and bear feeding together, the lion eating straw with an ox. And then, **“The earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.”** (Isaiah 11:9b) This is the picture of our world truly at peace and neighbors loving

neighbors. This is the direction God is moving his people. It is the ultimate hope we hold onto of a world redeemed and renewed and restored and made whole in the presence of God.

But remember, Isaiah also addressed immediate hope in the passages preceding this. God is at work in the struggles you and I face today. God is at work helping us claim our true selves, the people God created us to be. God is working in our present as well as the future.

We are in the time of Advent, the time of waiting for the coming of the Messiah. But even more, we live in the time where we know Jesus already came. We live in a time where we see peace and miracles happen in pockets here and there where none was expected. We live in a time when people who are surprisingly different reach out and work together to help others. We live in a time where some nations, like ours, can freely worship our Savior and share his name and help grow his Kingdom.

We live in the 'in between time' between Jesus' first coming and his next coming. Jesus began ushering in God's Kingdom and breakthroughs have been made, but the world is not yet as God intends. We are between immediate hope and ultimate hope.

But each of us, when we choose Jesus, have already received the seal of the Holy Spirit and we

know that whatever is going on in the world, we are forgiven, redeemed by our Savior and heaven bound. That's good news!

And we wait. We're not waiting for the first coming. We'll celebrate Jesus' birth knowing he already came and walked the earth showing us God's ways and offering salvation. He came and brought God's gift of faithful love and grace to a hurting world. We celebrate and give thanks for this gift. We also live as ones who know the ultimate hope, *there is better to come!*

We watch for God at work in our lives and the lives of loved ones. We see his holy hand. We ask in this time where we can be part of God's work, and we serve and help. We wait with expectancy for the next evidence of God at work and we are jubilant when we get to be part of facilitating God's best.

And we hold to the hope – the knowledge – that our God can and does bring life out of seemingly nothing.

This is God's promise. Stop the negative self-talk. You're thinking, but I'm too far gone, I've done too much wrong, I'm not worthy, I'm beyond God's reach. No, you aren't! God is the bringer of life who restores and renews even out of the seeming nothingness. Claim this truth! It is for you!

Howard shared how he lost hope. He survived Vietnam, but way too many others with him did not. He saw so much loss. And he questioned why he was alive. It didn't feel right. And he didn't know how to live with it. He tried to anesthetize himself from the horrible hurt.

And even in that state, God began to reach Howard through his grace drawing Howard a step at a time forward into knowing God's love for him. And God worked in the lives of others to take part in carrying God's love to Howard. The old wounds are healing, and the burdens are falling away, and God is molding and restoring Howard to the person he created him to be – far from the wounded dejected soldier.

And God wants to do this for each of you.

Hold onto God's promise. God can and does bring beauty and wholeness out of seemingly nothing. Will you open your heart and let him? Just whisper, "Lord, I want that wholeness. Help me." God is faithful.

Let us pray

Thank you, Lord, that just as you began creation out of nothing but your spoken word, you still take what we think is nothing and bring life. Help us, Lord, to the wholeness you've designed us for. Amen.