

Jesse: Family History

The Second Sunday of Advent, 8 December 2019.

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 8-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12.

I've been researching my family history lately.

St. Thomas folks know that part of the fun of moving to Columbus from Indianapolis for me was that my grandmother and great-grandmother were both born here. They lived in Atlanta when I was growing up. I had forgotten about the Columbus connection until my mother reminded me when I started interviewing here. Once I got to town, I learned my mother's family goes back even farther. My great-great grandmother was also born here. She and her husband are buried in Riverdale. My great-great-great grandparents are buried in Linwood. He was born in Mississippi. I think she was born in Harris County, but I haven't fully solved that puzzle yet. However, I know I will. Once you start searching, the floodgates open and you get more information than you ever dreamed. It is such a privilege to live and walk today where some of my ancestors lived.

Our lessons for today speak of different types of family inheritance. Isaiah dreamed of a shoot rising from the stump of Jesse. And John called the people who came to see him a brood of vipers.

Let's start with the shoot of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of King David, but he almost kept his son from the throne. When Samuel came to anoint one of Jesse's sons as king, Jesse brought out the oldest and strongest and most accomplished first. Samuel said he wasn't the one. So Jesse brought the sons out one at a time. None were called. Finally, Samuel asked, "Do you have any more sons?" Jesse reluctantly brought out the youngest child, the one everyone forgot, the shepherd boy David. To his father's surprise, he became the greatest king of Israel. He brought a time of strength and prosperity the nation had never known. For generations to come, people remembered David and longed to recreate his reign. But, sadly, he made a lot of mistakes as well. He started the process of building an empire, which was not what God had in mind. His son Solomon continued the pattern. After Solomon, it all fell apart, which is what happens to empires who amass power and wealth at the expense of the common good. Over the centuries, the kingdom split in two. The northern part was conquered by Assyria and wiped out, the lost tribes of Israel. Later, the southern part was taken captive in Babylon.

Isaiah lived in the southern kingdom while the northern kingdom was being conquered. He saw the tree of Jesse, everything David had built, get cut down. But in the midst of that desolation, he had this vision. A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse. Some think he was envisioning Jesus but some think he was simply trusting that God's good work would continue. The tree had been cut down, but there was still life in it. A new shoot would grow from the stump. A branch would spring up from the roots. Like the Nandina I cannot control in my yard, Isaiah trusted that everything David's line represented would eventually grow and flourish.

But it would be a healthier branch. Rather than get lost in empire-building like David had done, this branch would delight in the fear of the Lord. This branch would judge in favor of the poor. The reign of this branch would usher in a peaceable kingdom, with all creation at harmony with itself. The result would be peace and safety for everyone.

*They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;*

*for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord
as the waters cover the sea.*

By the time of John the Baptist, of course, that vision had not been fulfilled. The descendants of Jesse had not ushered in an era of peace and safety. A great king like David had not arisen to solve the nation's problems. In fact, John seems to have given up on the whole idea. John did not preach or prepare the way for a new king like David. John wanted to bypass the middleman and go straight to the source. John was praying for the reign of heaven itself, the reign of the God of heaven on earth.

It is strange that people flocked to him. John came out of the wilderness. He wore clothes he made himself. He ate locusts and wild honey. He was not your typical influencer. But people flocked to him because they knew he spoke truth. He baptized people left and right. But when the religious leaders came to the river, he called them a brood of vipers and would not let them in the water.

I recently found the inscription on the grave of my great-great grandfather on my dad's side. It reads, "A man of honest heart, the noblest work of God." His sister's obituary described her as an "outstanding Christian lady" and said, "Her Christian life was an inspiration to her many neighbors, friends, and loved ones." It made me proud to read that some of my ancestors were deeply Christian people. But their faithfulness does not automatically mean that my generation will be faithful. We all have to do our own work.

That's what John was trying to say. The Pharisees and Sadducees claimed the faithfulness of the people in the past as their own. They claimed to be children of Abraham and heirs of his covenant with God. But John said their ancestry did not matter because they were not living like Abraham's children. They were not bearing fruit worthy of repentance. They were more like children of vipers, children of the serpent in the Garden of Eden who messed everything up.

We should be careful to note that John's warning was not just for the religious leaders of his time. John's sermon applies to anyone who is content to rest on the faithfulness of others rather than forge your own path. Just because your grandmother was a saint does not mean you will be. Just because our nation stood for justice and freedom in the past does not mean we can rest now. Just because St. Thomas has a wonderful history of witness and service does not mean we can turn aside from that work today. Bishop Andy Doyle, the Episcopal Bishop of Texas, wrote in his blog on this gospel lesson that we should be asking ourselves in the Episcopal Church, "Have we for too long stood on the shoulders of our ancient traditions and ancestry as Anglicans and Episcopalians? Are we bearing the fruit of the kingdom of God?"

But there is hope, even for children of vipers. God is able to raise up children of Abraham from the stones. God can take what is dead in us and bring it to life. Jesus is coming to winnow and clear away everything that holds us back, everything that makes us look more like serpents than siblings.

And John seemed to suggest it was like opening the floodgates on ancestry.com. I've learned that one search leads to a wealth of information you never knew existed. Likewise, one act of repentance, the baptism of John, would lead to the fiery, overwhelming, wonderful transformation of the Holy Spirit.

Isaiah saw a dead tree and knew it would live again. John saw some hardened hearts and knew God was able to raise up children from the stones.

Which do we hope to be? A dead stump or the growing shoot of Jesse? A brood of vipers or children of Abraham?

We are all a bit of both. That's why this season of Advent focuses on repentance. We always need to clear away the dead wood so the new branches can grow. Preparing for the coming of Christ is not just about shopping and baking and decorating and counting down the days. It is about clearing out our lives to make room for God's life in us.

So what can you do this week to turn your life a little more toward Isaiah's vision of life? What can you do to be a little more mindful of the promises of baptism? What can you do to be a little more like Jesus, whose coming we await? Amen.

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