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“Possible Impossibilities”

A sermon by Mindy L. Douglas

Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)

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Isaiah 11:1-9

Oh, don't you love the passage Amy read from Isaiah this morning? It is full of rich images—of life-giving, peace-filled, hope-sustaining images. The prophet Isaiah gives us a gift, I think, this season of Advent. A gift of beauty, of life in surprising places and of peace in places where there has never been peace. The first image this passage gives us is the one which adorns the front of your bulletin cover—the image of a living green shoot coming out of an old, dead stump.

Now, everyone knows that the way to get rid of a tree is to chop it down. It doesn't matter how tall it is or how broad it is or how green and leafy it is. If you grab an axe, or today a chain saw, and cut it down, that is the end of that tree. It is dead. Done. Gone. Except that in many cases it isn't really. Several years ago, when I lived in a house with a large, tree-filled yard, it became clear that a few trees leaning dangerously toward the house needed to be cut down. The professionals were called in and the trees came down. I was left with the stumps. Before I had a chance to grind the stumps down, though, life appeared again in these all-but-dead stumps. It was as if the soul of the tree was crying out—“I am not ready to die! I want to live!”

In a part of the countryside just north of Hillsborough, there is a field and an old barn set back from the road that has rotted away to almost nothing but a few bare bones. Inside the barn is a tree that must have fallen years and years ago. From the trunk of the fallen tree, however, now grows tree after tree after tree—up through

the bones of the old barn, up from the dead tree that gave them life. At least 20 or 30 trees stand determinedly and courageously there—all of them 15-30 feet high, full of branches and, during the growing season, adorned with pale to dark green leaves that reach up for the sunlight. Every time I drive past this scene, I think to myself, I must stop and take a picture of this. Life out of the midst of death. What a powerful image.

This is the first image Isaiah gives us today. One of life coming out of that which seems to be dead—a shoot out of a stump. As Isaiah tells it, the stump is the House of David and the shoot is their new leader who will bring about a different kind of peace.

This word from Isaiah would be very good news to the discouraged people of Israel. After all, they had kind of lost their mojo. They were in the depths of despair. Their political situation was the pits. And deservedly so! After all, they had turned away from God. Isaiah makes it clear. They had been proud and arrogant (9:9), and had neglected the needs of the poor and disadvantaged (10:2). They had turned away from God. As a result, they were cut down to nothing, reduced to their very lowest point—they were but a stump with no branches, no height, no leaves, no strength, no life and no power at all. Their future was bleak indeed.

And then, Isaiah speaks a word of hope to them. Take a look at the stump again, Isaiah invites God's people. A shoot. A green shoot. It's there—on the stump—growing. Life. Hope. Possibility. It's right there. Isaiah invites the Israelites to make a radical turn from death to life and to find hope in the place of their deepest and darkest despair. This hope, this green shoot, comes in the form of a new leader. A new leader guided by the spirit of the Lord. This is Isaiah's second image. This image is of a young king. "He exudes vitality and strength [says one writer], severity and a brilliance of joy; deep wisdom is in his eyes."¹ Isaiah describes a new leader who will lead in faithfulness and righteousness, a new leader who will change the world and turn all the rules of nature and aggression on their heads.

¹ David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., *Feasting on the Word, Year A, Vol. 1*, Paul Simpson Duke, "Isaiah 11:1-10," (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2010), 27.

The rules of life [writes one pastor] will be changed, bent in the direction of gentleness and peace, not just any peace, but shalom. “Shalom,” Walter Brueggemann says, “is creation time, when all God’s creation eases up on hostility and destruction and finds another way of relating” (*Peace*).²

And this is our third image.

This week in our weekly newsletter, I shared a painting by John August Swanson. If you saw it, you know how full of color and light and personality it was. He also has a painting of the peaceable kingdom based on today’s text, and you can see it on the back of your bulletin. This painting, also full of color and light, reflects the peace of creation Isaiah describes in this text—a peace that is unlike any other peace known to this world—where enemies rest quietly together, where wolf and lamb live together, where leopard lies with the baby goat, where a nursing baby plays near the hole of venomous snake, and where the lion eats not meat, but straw.

What Isaiah is describing here and what Swanson depicts in bold images is more than beautiful. It is shocking! It is impossible, really, and everyone knows it. It does not reflect the reality of the world. These relationships in the animal kingdom are not possible. Never have they been seen and never could anyone imagine that they would be!

Exactly.

This is exactly Isaiah’s point. He wants the people of Israel to see that the impossible is possible when the earth is filled with the knowledge of the Lord, just as the waters cover the sea, when men and women lead with wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, righteousness and faithfulness, knowledge and the fear of the Lord. Shalom in the most impossible way becomes possible.

Shalom—another way of relating to other nations and peoples—without guns or bombs, tanks or terror. It is possible.

² <http://www.ucc.org/worship/samuel/december-5-2010-second.html>

Shalom—another way of relating to our neighbors—without prejudice or fear, finger-pointing or name-calling. It is possible.

Shalom—another way of relating to all of creation, without careless destruction and misuse of resources, with an understanding of every part of creation as a part of the fabric of the universe, necessary for a complete and beautiful tapestry. It is possible.

Shalom. This is what this new leader invites us to be a part of—a newness which brings about another way of relating to each other and to the world. A way that runs counter to the way we have always done it. A completely *different* way. A way in which those in power don't feed off the weak. A way in which *all* are equal, no matter their race, class, religion, country of origin, or sexual orientation—no matter their language, ability, gender or age.

Friends! Can you dream of this? Can you hope for this? Can you believe it is possible?

Through this new leader, God will usher in an age when right doesn't have to be proven by might, where people can live as themselves out in the open and not have to pretend to be someone they are not, where our fears don't dictate our actions and our insecurities don't cause us to be defensive. This new age will show us the possible impossibility—where we can live in the world in love for others that isn't tainted by jealousy, pride, racism, selfishness, judgment, or self-doubt.

This Shalom, this peace of all creation, will bring about a new way of relating to one another. A new way of relating to the world. As Julian of Norwich once said of this promised time of Shalom, “All shall be well and all shall be well and all manner of things shall be well.”

It is possible.

In our world, we take for granted that Sunni will always hate Shiite. That certain tribes in certain countries will always be fighting. That there will always be tension among the races. That Arabs and Israelis will always be at war. That the rich will

get richer at the expense of the poor. That somebody somewhere will always be at war with somebody somewhere else. That lions will always eat lambs.

But Jesus came to change all of that—to turn all of that on its head and return to the shalom intended from the beginning of creation. Jesus came to be that branch from the stump of Jesse—that hope beyond our wildest imaginings—that peace that passes all understanding. Jesus became human to live the *Shalom* in our midst. Jesus became human and turned the world on its head.

In Christ there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave or free, male or female. There is no longer wolf or lamb, leopard or kid, cow or bear, infant or adder, black or white, rich or poor, stranger or refugee. All are made new. All become one in Christ.

It seems impossible, doesn't it?

As Nelson Mandela would say, “It always seems impossible until it's done.”

May Jesus be our guide to Shalom, friends. Let's get it done.

Because sermons are meant to be preached and are therefore prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation (i.e., are written for the ear), the written accounts occasionally deviate from proper and generally accepted principles of grammar and punctuation. Most often, these deviations are not mistakes per se, but are indicative of an attempt to aid the listener in the delivery of the sermon.

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