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Advent 2 • Isaiah 11:1–10 • December 8, 2013

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The tree metaphor with which the text begins is a continuation of the same metaphor introduced at the end of the preceding chapter (Is 10:33–34). There the metaphor is used *for law purposes*. “The Lord Almighty will lop off the boughs ... the lofty trees will be felled” (NIV) and “Lebanon with its majestic trees will fall” (RSV). The threatening metaphor is applied to Assyria in the immediate context (Is 10:24) and to Israel in the more remote context (Is 6:13). Because of their wickedness God cuts these nations down and reduces them to a mere stump.

But in our text God uses the tree metaphor *for gospel purposes*. From the stump to which Israel has been reduced, called “the stump of Jesse” (King David’s father) in our text, a shoot or twig will grow, resulting in the fabulous peace and salvation so poetically described in verses 6–9 of the text.

Note especially that the tree metaphor “bookends” or “frames” the text, appearing in the first verse and surfacing again in the last verse. Even as a frame contains and highlights the picture it surrounds, so the tree metaphor contains and highlights the beautiful gospel picture in our text. The framing verses (1 and 10) bring that gospel into sharper focus. There is gospel not only in the content of our text but also gospel in its structure. God’s gospel heart is shown not only in what he says but also in the way he says it.

Although the tree metaphor frames our text, its use in verse 10 is not a mere repetition of its use in verse 1. There is progress. The shoot of verse 1 becomes a root in verse 10. A descendant has become a progenitor. A product of life has become a source of life.

That the tree is a metaphor for an actual person is clear to begin with from the phrase “the stump of *Jesse*” (v. 1). Jesse, of course, is the father of King David, and King David is the ancestor of Jesus, the Messiah (often called in the Bible “the Son of David”). Thus “the shoot” that grows out of “the stump of Jesse” is the Lord Jesus himself. Further, verses 2–5 continue to speak of this “shoot” as a person.

Verses 2–5 incidentally suggest a possible outline for a sermon on this text. Those verses describe:

Three Aspects of Jesus, the Promised Messiah

- I. His endowments for rule (wisdom, power, faithfulness, righteousness, etc.).
- II. His relationship with God the Father (“his delight shall be in the fear of the Lord”—RSV) and his relationship with God the Holy Spirit (“the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him”—RSV).
- III. His relationship with the people he rules (vv. 3b–4 and especially vv. 6–9).

If the suggested outline is used, the pastor will need to expand part III (especially his consideration of vv. 6–9) in his sermon to remain true to the emphasis of the text. These verses are loaded with beautiful metaphors that capture the fabulous peace

resulting from the Messiah-King's rule. So extensive is this peace that it's as if ferocious animals were to consort with domestic animals (vv. 6–7), the former not only abandoning their customary carnivorous appetite but even settling for the tamer foods of the latter (v. 7b). Not only will there be peace between animals and animals but also between animals and people. Normally dangerous creatures will not even harm a child (v. 8); in fact, “a little child shall lead them” (v. 6). This peace, resulting from the knowledge of the salvation Messiah brings, will be as universal as the water covering the sea (v. 9).

Beautiful metaphor, yes, but more than metaphor. Might these verses also hint at the truth of Romans 8:20–22, that the redemption the Messiah effects will embrace, in some way, the whole universe, the world of creatures as well as the world of people?

Note that this text pictures salvation as a Trinitarian activity. All three persons of God are engaged in our salvation. The “shoot,” of course, is Jesus, the second person of the Triune God. “The fear of the Lord” refers to God the Father, the first person. And “the Spirit of the Lord” refers to the Holy Spirit, the third person.

Should the preacher wish to incorporate the other pericopes for the day into his sermon, our text provides verbal links to facilitate the effort. The “righteousness” and “justice” with which the Messiah-King treats “the poor” in our text are spoken of extensively in the psalm for the day, Psalm 72: 1–7. The “stump of Jesse” mentioned in our text is referred to as “the root of Jesse” in verse 12 of the epistle for the day, Romans 15:4–13. The tree metaphor of our text surfaces in verse 10 of the gospel for this Sunday, Matthew 3:1–12.

Although bonus gospel for this text is like carrying coals to Newcastle, there is opportunity for additional gospel in the metaphor of verse 7, “The lion shall eat straw like the ox.” Via gospel handle methodology this metaphor can connect us with the reference to Jesus himself as a lion in Hosea 11:10 and especially in Revelation 5:5, a metaphor for Jesus popularized by C. S. Lewis with his depiction of Aslan the lion as a Christ symbol in the *Chronicles of Narnia*. This “Lion of Judah,” Christ, shared our nature and shared our life. He became flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and he experienced our joys, our emotions, our hardships, our temptations, our work, our play, our routines, even our food. In a sense this lion too ate “straw like the ox.” To realize the extent and the purpose of the Lion of Judah “sharing our fare,” read especially Hebrews 2:11, 14–15, 17–18. We rejoice in our Lord's incarnation. We are thankful to the Lion of Judah for “sharing our fare,” for eating “straw like the ox.” Because he did so, we now enjoy eternal peace with him, just like the peace pictured between the lion and the ox in verse 7 of our text.

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