

Life in the Gap¹

Isaiah 11:1-9

Rev. Jeff Chapman ~ December 4, 2016 ~ Faith Presbyterian Church

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¹A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.
⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.
⁷The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.
⁸The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.
⁹They 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. (Isaiah 11:1-9, NRSV)

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Isaiah was a prophet, one of the most important prophets in ancient Israel. His job, which is the job of all prophets, was not simply to convey information from God but to cast vision, to reveal heaven on earth, to spark belief and faith where belief and faith had become scarce. Above all, a prophet presents God to the people as holy – set apart, righteous beyond description, worthy of our worship, attractive, intense and real.

This is what Isaiah was sent to do for the people of his time, people to whom God had made a promise. Centuries beforehand, God had promised an old, childless man named Abraham that he and his wife Sarah would become the headwaters of a great nation. God would make their descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky. God would be their God forever and they would always be his people. He would bless them and they would flourish in every way. Eventually they would in turn be a blessing to all other nations.²

Israel knew well this covenant God had made with them through Abraham and it was their hope. They also knew that God promised to one day send a Messiah, a Savior, to bring all this about. They knew that this Messiah would be a

¹ I'm borrowing this image from Walter Brueggemann in his excellent introduction to Isaiah in *The Life With God Bible, NRSV* (New York: Harper, 1989), 983.

² Read the covenant in Genesis 12:1-3.

descendant of Jesse, who was the father of David, the greatest king Israel ever had. This was the promise God had made to them, and at times it must have seemed too good to be true.

So what about us? What about you? What promises has God made to you? What hope do you have? Do you believe that God has promised you healing in your life? Do you believe that God has guaranteed victory in your life, that one day you will be set free from whatever person or thing or addiction or bondage which is now keeping you down? Is it your understanding that God has promised you a place to belong, a community or family where you know you are loved? Has God promised to give you a purpose in this life, something to do which truly makes a difference in this world? Has God promised you forgiveness, to release you from whatever guilt and shame weighs on your soul? Think about it. It's important. What do you believe God has promised you? And beyond that, do you believe God has kept his promise?

Isaiah was sent as a prophet to Israel in the 8th century B.C. As you may know, this was not a high point in Israel's history. King David has been dead for centuries. His dynasty has been decimated, his kingdom destroyed. In addition, the city of Jerusalem had been constantly under siege as hostile enemy after hostile enemy came to conquer. Ultimately the Babylonians came and completely destroyed the city, including the Temple, and hauled off the Israelites, at least the best and the brightest, to years of exile in Babylon.

If ever Israel needed a Messiah it was now. But again, the line of David, through which the Messiah was to come, had been severed completely. Even the great city of Jerusalem had been brought to ruins. And all this was the result of God's judgment. Because the people, time and time again, wandered from God, willfully disobeyed his commands, turned their worship and affection towards false gods, God's judgment fell upon them, like an axe brought down heavy upon the trunk of a tree. Maybe this was straight punishment, God unleashing hardship to discipline his people. Or maybe this was consequences, God allowing his people to experience the natural and inevitable results of their choices. Either way, the results were the same as grief seemed about ready to swallow up hope. To those people in those days it must have seemed as unlikely as ever that God's promises would ever be fulfilled.

So what about us? Are there times in your life when you have also sensed that grief is about to swallow up hope? Have you ever come to that place where you wondered if God had forgotten what he promised, or maybe gone and changed his mind? Maybe you even recognize the mess you're in is your own making. Or maybe the mess wasn't caused by you. Either way, you need a Savior. You thought one was promised. But you're losing hope that one is actually going to show up. And then the questions come. Is God faithful after all? Does God even exist after all? Because I have made such a mess of things have I forfeited the promise, disqualified myself from ever receiving it? What have I done wrong? Do I not have enough faith? Am I being punished? Have I been forgotten?

This is the place where Isaiah found the people of Israel when God sent him to them. It may also be the place where we, at least some of us, are found today as his words come to us. Every person of faith finds themselves in this place at one point or another, sometimes for years. And in that place, this is what God says to us through his prophet: **"A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots."**

Earlier this year I read a captivating book by Timothy Egan called *The Big Burn*. It chronicles the story of the Great Fire of 1910, a fire that burned about three million acres in northeast Washington, northern Idaho and western Montana. The firestorm – and that's truly what it was – raged for only two days but completely destroyed seven towns, did severe damage to many others, took the lives of 87 people, mostly firefighters, and left a swath of scorched earth the size of Connecticut. To date it is the largest forest fire in U.S. history.

If you've ever been to a forest after it has been devastated by fire perhaps you can imagine the scene afterwards. In those places nothing appears to have survived. No animal. No tree. No plant. Not even a single blade of grass. By all appearances, all hope for life in the future seemed to have been lost. And yet if you had the patience to wait and to watch, in time you would have seen life begin to emerge. It never comes all at once and it certainly doesn't happen quickly. But one by one, green shoots begin to appear. Seeds now cracked and released by the heat of the fire take root and eventually push up from the ash towards the sunlight.

The devastation, much of it self-inflicted, that Israel faced at the time of Isaiah was comparable to the scorched earth that the people in the Northwest faced after the Great Fire. By all appearances, all hope for the future seemed to be lost for them as well. The promises of God seemed to have either been forgotten, defaulted, or broken. And yet here is

Isaiah, one sent to cast a vision of holy God, urging the people to wait and watch for hope to emerge from the ashes. God promised a Messiah from the tree of David and that tree is now a dead stump. But wait and watch, Isaiah says. A shoot will come up. A branch will grow from the roots where life still remains.

I wonder if you remember how the Christmas story begins in Luke's Gospel. Pay attention as I read it and see what you notice.

In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. All went to their own towns to be registered. Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David.³

Mary and Joseph were peasants, so poor they had no place to stay when they arrived in Bethlehem. They went anyway, even though Mary was about to give birth, because all descendants of David went there to be counted in the census. While they were there she gave birth to a child, ordinary in one sense because he would have looked exactly like every other Jewish baby born in those days, but extraordinary in another sense because of how his birth had come to be. Still, this small life could not have emerged in more humble circumstances. He was born in obscurity and poverty on a silent night when most of the world paid no attention, save for a couple of nobody shepherds and a few fortune tellers from the east.

You see, unless you're paying very close attention, nobody notices the tiny shoot that peeks out from beneath the ground in the middle of a vast wasteland of ashes. Unless you were paying even closer attention, you also never would have noticed this tiny branch that emerged that night from the stump of Jesse. The shepherds only noticed because God sent them an angel-gram. The wise men only came because God lured them with a star. But the shoot emerged nonetheless, just like Isaiah said that it would.

This is God's way, by the way. God doesn't tend to come into our world with great fanfare. He will someday, in the end, but in the meantime he seems to prefer to slip in quietly. He plants a desire in a heart, an idea in a mind. He uses the encouraging words of a friend, or words of challenge when necessary, to guide in a new direction. He speaks through the ancient words of a book written by people who were chosen to preserve his message. He shows up in the silence and the waiting, often bringing nothing but silence himself. He whispers instead of shouts, making it hard to hear him when there is too much noise or motion. He moves in small steps rather than giant leaps. To him a day is like a thousand years and a thousand years is like a day.

When God shows up, however, especially when he shows up through his long-awaited Messiah, do not underestimate the power and grace he brings. Isaiah spells it out for us,

**The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.**

This is what Christ comes to bring those who have not given up on God's promises. First, the very Spirit of God. This is no mere prophet or teacher, God comes with this man because this man is God. So he brings wisdom and understanding, for in Christ we find the truth revealed because, as he taught, he *is* the truth. He also brings counsel, a willingness not just to show us the way but actually become the Way for us. He brings might as well, power to do what only God can do. And perhaps most of all, Christ brings the fear of the Lord. This fear is not terror but reverence, a sincere desire to give oneself fully to worship the One who is without question worthy of worship. In fact, once we fear the Lord, turn our affections and faith to him, there is nothing else in this world we need fear ever again. This is his delight!

And there's more! Isaiah goes on,

³ Luke 2:1-4, NRSV

**He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
 or decide by what his ears hear;
 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
 and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
 he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
 and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.**

When Christ comes he comes to judge. This is a good thing because he is a good and righteous judge. He does not judge by appearances, by the way the world judges. Instead, he truly discerns what is wrong in the world and then removes it. This is particularly good news for the poor among us, not only the economically poor but all who lack what God has intended. As Jesus himself once told his disciples, “Blessed are the poor in spirit, and those who grieve, and the meek, and those thirsty for making things right, and the merciful, and the pure in heart, and peacemakers, and the persecuted.”⁴

The word he will speak will be full of power. In fact, whatever he speaks immediately becomes reality,⁵ which is of course what happened when Jesus spoke. With only a word from his mouth the leper was healed, the blind man saw in living color, the dead man walked out of his tomb. And when he taught, the people couldn’t fathom how this ordinary rabbi could speak with such authority. It was almost as if God was speaking, which of course was exactly what was happening.

In those days when a man put a belt he put around his garments that belt became the most important piece of clothing because it held everything else together so that he was ready to go out for work or for battle. The phrase ‘girding one’s loins’, therefore, came to signify that a man was now fully prepared and equipped to do what he was setting out to do. Isaiah writes, **“Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins.”** That is what Christ came ready to do, to set things right in the world and, in doing so, show God’s faithfulness by fulfilling God’s promise.

The next verses give a beautiful picture of what that looks like. The wolf will lie down with the lamb. The cow and the bear will share a pasture together. The child shall play games with the rattlesnake. In a word, peace will cover the world, as the waters cover the sea. Peace will be restored between God and his people, a relationship now made right forever. Also peace will exist between all people, one to another. And there will even be peace between people and nature and within nature itself. In short, all that is wrong with the world will be made right again.

Which gets us back to where we started, to God’s promises. We hear again what God has promised. And what God promised to Abraham he promises to us, blessing and life, all things set right. And though we have seen the fulfillment, in part, of those promises as Christ has already come into our world, we still do not live in a world where wolves and lambs lay down together, or if they do the lambs don’t get much sleep! The people in Isaiah’s day lived among the ruins and waited for God to make things new. It’s not so different in our day. We also wait in that gap, the gap between grief and hope, between promise and fulfillment, between judgment and grace, between exile and homecoming, between death and resurrection.

Advent is a time of waiting. Each year before Christmas the church sets aside this season as a time to wait, not for the baby Jesus to be born – that tender shoot already emerged! – but for Christ to come again into our world and finish what he started. And this waiting is hard as all waiting is hard. Some of you know that far better than me. You’re waiting for healing, for yourself or another you love. You’re waiting for justice, for wrongs which have been done to be made right. You’re waiting for peace, for the day when anxiety and worry will fade away. You’re waiting to be set free, from some addiction or habit that has its claws in you. You’re waiting for reconciliation in some relationship which was previously torn in two. You’re waiting for the ache of grief to ease, for the day when your heart and soul don’t feel so heavy.

In this gap time, what promise of God are you waiting to see him fulfill? And can you hold on in faith until the day when fulfillment comes? Maybe what Isaiah is telling us here is that our job in this time of waiting is to keep an eye out

⁴ Matthew 5:3-10

⁵ See Isaiah 55:10-11

for tender shoots and fragile branches that sprout up around us, sometimes in unexpected places. Can we have eyes to see the ways God is moving in the ashes to help life emerge?

Recently I had the privilege of sitting with a group of about twelve people from our church who had just completed the Life Together course. After we shared dinner together one evening, an opportunity was given for individuals to share the story of their faith journey. One by one people did exactly that. Now, it's not my place to tell you what any of those people said, but I will say generally that in story after story I heard people reflect back to seasons of their life when the landscape seemed full of ashes. You know, the level of pain and loss that so many people in our church have endured sometimes leaves me speechless. And yet, as these men and women talked about times when going on in life seemed impossible, they also talked about ways that small shoots of God's grace began to emerge from the ashes. For each of them, grief eventually was challenged by hope. To a person, not one of them claimed that life had now become easy and pain free. In fact, in many cases life is still hard. But hope has emerged. Promises are being fulfilled. Healing is happening. New life actually seems possible. God is proving to be faithful. In the end, you know, he does not let us down.

In his book called *Sabbatical Journeys*, writer Henri Nouwen gives one of the most beautiful pictures of waiting I've ever heard. He writes about some friends of his who were trapeze artists in a group called The Flying Roudellas. These friends often talked with Henri about the very special relationship that exists on the trapeze between the flyer—the one who lets go—and the catcher—the one who catches. As we all might imagine, trust in this relationship is critical — especially from the perspective of the flyer!

You see, as the flyer swings high above the crowd on the trapeze, there comes a moment when he must let go. In that moment he arcs out into the air and his job is to remain as still as possible and to wait for the strong hands of the catcher to pluck him from the air. One of the flyers from the Flying Roudellas once put it this way to Henri Nouwen, “In that moment everyone applauds for me because, when I do those leaps and back flips, they think I'm a hero. But I'm not the real hero. The real hero is the catcher because as I come down from the triple somersault, all I have to do is stretch out my hands and trust, trust that he will be there to pull me back up.”

And then he added this, “The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. The flyer must simply wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him. But he must wait.”⁶

Friends, hear this. God has promised to catch us. And so maybe our job during this season of waiting, not only in Advent but beyond, is to keep our eyes open for tender shoots around us, signs that our Savior actually is coming girded with righteousness and faithfulness. We wait and watch in faith, anticipating that we will find these shoots emerging all around us because they are, and always have been, ever since that first one emerged in Bethlehem all those years ago.

Know that God's first and final word to us is always a word of promise. He will do what he said he will do. He will catch us. We have his word on it. And so we wait.

Amen.



The Next Step

A resource for Life Groups and/or personal application

1. Read Isaiah 11:1-9 again. This text is full of powerful imagery. Which image stands out most to you? Why?
2. The New Testament interprets the “branch” to be Jesus. What stories, teachings, or actions of Jesus recorded in the New Testament come to mind as you consider the his qualities described in verses 2-5?
3. When you visualize the picture of what God promises to do through the Messiah in verses 6-9, what comes into your mind?

⁶ Cited at <http://www.christianitytoday.com/moi/2003/002/march/that-daring-young-man.html>

4. It's been said that this passage describes life that is in the in-between place between despair and hope. In your life right now, does it feel as if you are closer to despair or hope?
5. What promise of God are you most eagerly waiting to see fulfilled in your life? For the world?
6. How do you see 'shoots' of God's kingdom springing up around you? Small as they may be, can you point to an example of how you see God bringing life out of the ashes?
7. II Peter 3:8-9 states, "Beloved, do not let this one thing escape your notice: With the Lord a day is like a thousand years, and a thousand years are like a day. The Lord is not slow to fulfill His promise as some understand slowness, but is patient with you, not wanting anyone to perish, but everyone to come to repentance." What does this mean to you?
8. Who is one person in your life right now who needs to hear this message of hope? How can you communicate it to them this week?



Table to Table

Questions for kids and adults to answer together

God has made a lot of promises. Take a minute to think of as many as you can think of. What is something God has not promised?