

# "A Stump?"

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An Advent Reflection before the carol, *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*

Isaiah 11.1-9; Luke 1.26-38

December 6, 2020

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## **A Stump**

That's it. That's all. All that's left. Just this.

Once holding up head-lifting, sky-touching majesty. Once crowning the canopy. Once filtering the sun, so it brightened but did not burn. Once sheltering birds and squirrels, a bio-system for bugs. Once shedding leaves, seasonal deaths to cover the floor and await springtime births. Once standing straight as strong as forever.

Once. Now gone. No more. Just this.

The king's palace, wrecked. The nation's wealth, looted. The holy places, ravished. The living torn down. The dead dug up. The streets empty, but for dusty rubble and dried blood, and tears.

Silent. Everywhere, silent. God of everywhere. Silent.

What of You, God? And what of Yours? The House of David, the lineage of Jesse, anointed to rule for You, forever. The City of David, Jerusalem on Zion's mount, lit to shine for You, forever. The People of . . . of You, Israel, Your Beloved, chosen to bless for You, forever.

Now fallen, as is the way of all nations. Now decimated, as is the way of all cities. Now cast down, as is the way of all who rule. All the forest, clear-cut and burned over.

This is it. This is all. All that's left. Just this. A stump.

## **A Shoot**

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots. . . .*

That's it? That's all? All You've got? Just this?

A tiny, weak, nearly nothing? A few faint brushstrokes of green, swallowed in the grey of decay? A hot day could burn it off, hardly breaking a sweat. A cold night could snap it with frost, leaving nothing left. A foraging beast could tear it with teeth, then lick its chops.

This is Your answer? All we've got to count on?

Your fragile promise, Lord Almighty

### **The Branch**

*A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse;  
a branch will sprout from his roots.*

*The Lord's spirit will rest upon him,  
a spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
a spirit of planning and strength,  
a spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.*

*He will delight in fearing the Lord.  
He won't judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay.  
He will judge the needy with righteousness,  
and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land.  
He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth;  
by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked.*

*Righteousness will be the belt around his hips,  
and faithfulness the belt around his waist.*

*The wolf will live with the lamb,  
and the leopard will lie down with the young goat;  
the calf and the young lion will feed together,  
and a little child will lead them.  
The cow and the bear will graze.  
Their young will lie down together,  
and a lion will eat straw like an ox.  
A nursing child will play over the snake's hole;  
toddlers will reach right over the serpent's den.  
They won't harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain.  
The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the Lord,  
just as the water covers the sea.*

Okay! Now we're talking!

This shoot, God will grow into a tree. This small beginning, God will flourish into a forest. This tiny remnant, a leftover, is God's Messiah and all things will be blessed.

Look at who he is: Spirit-filled with wisdom and understanding, foresight and strength, knowledge and reverence.

Look at how he'll lead: Justice, finally. Fairness, fully. In particular, for those who are poor. All who cut them down with destruction and hate, God will finish.

Look at what will happen: Peace. Reconciliation, through all creation. No fear. God's way, everywhere.

All because of the shoot, growing from a stump, who is God's anointed, our Messiah.

**Look!**

*When Elizabeth was six months pregnant,  
God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee,  
to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph,  
a descendant of David's house.  
The virgin's name was Mary.*

*When the angel came to her, he said,  
"Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"*

*She was confused by these words  
and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*

*The angel said,  
"Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look! . . ."*

Look?

Galilee? Not much of worth there, just fishers, farmers, and foreigners.

Nazareth? Not much good will ever come from a place like that.

A virgin? Not old enough to be given in marriage.

Not much to look at, is there?

**Rejoice!**

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God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a city in Galilee,  
to a virgin who was engaged to a man named Joseph,  
a descendant of David's house.  
The virgin's name was Mary.*

*When the angel came to her, he said,  
"Rejoice, favored one! The Lord is with you!"*

*She was confused by these words  
and wondered what kind of greeting this might be.*

*The angel said,  
"Don't be afraid, Mary. God is honoring you. Look!"*

*You will conceive and give birth to a son,  
and you will name him Jesus.  
He will be great and he will be called the Son of the Most High.  
The Lord God will give him the throne of David his father.  
He will rule over Jacob's house forever,  
and there will be no end to his kingdom."*

*Then Mary said to the angel,  
"How will this happen since I haven't had sexual relations with a man?"*

*The angel replied,  
"The Holy Spirit will come over you  
and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.  
Therefore, the one who is to be born will be holy.  
He will be called God's Son.*

*Look, even in her old age,  
your relative Elizabeth has conceived a son.  
This woman who was labeled 'unable to conceive'  
is now six months pregnant.*

*Nothing is impossible for God."*

*Then Mary said,  
"I am the Lord's servant. Let it be with me just as you have said."*

*Then the angel left her.*

Okay! Now we're talking!

Look! Rejoice! This Mary is going to birth a baby.

Look! Rejoice! The tiny shoot from the stump of Jesse, the embryonic inheritor of God's promise to David. His mustard-seed kingdom is coming. His hidden-yeast reign will be over all, forever and ever.

Look! Rejoice! The Holy Spirit will give this child, and he'll be holy, in the fullness of God.

Look! Rejoice! In even the Elizabeths well-past their prime, God's new life is being born.

Look! Rejoice! Nothing is impossible for God.

And Look! Rejoice! She says "Yes!" With a small, still voice that thunders through the cosmos.

## Half-Spent

In a few moments, we're going to hear a carol of the season: *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*.

It comes from the Rhineland region of Germany, and might go back as far as the 1400s. It was first published in 1599, with 23 verses! These days we usually hear only one or two. Two of these were brought into English in 1894, and the third much more recently. The tune is also German. It's simple, and often sung unaccompanied by instruments.

There is a mixing together of those two passages Jeff read: first, of the small shoot coming from the lifeless stump of Jesus (King David's father); then, of the Saviour forming within the virgin Nazarene named Mary (King Jesus' mother).

God's much-promised Presence, to sprout where life was presumed to be ended, and therefore barren.

Our much-needed Saviour, to birth from a mother whose pregnancy was presumed premature, and therefore scandalous.

This rose, Jesus. Sung from olden days, blooming and beheld, showing God's love. Our Saviour sweet, pushing back the darkness, lightening the load.

The beauty of the words and the music also holds a tension. Perhaps a sadness, even. For as we listen, it is still dark and the load heavy. For only half-spent is the night.

This year, unlike any we've known, is coming to a close. Still, it feels only half-spent. An ending, it is in sight. But it feels like sighting a destination in the distance on the prairies. Amid the cold of winter, you can see it, but it's still a long walk away.

Maybe this year, this song fits extra-well. Not too exuberant, nor jump-up-and-down joyful. Simple. Inviting. Hopeful. And real.

After all, look what begins from very little. A shoot lifted from a stump. An embryo wrapped in a womb. The Saviour Rose!

Please listen to *Lo, How a Rose E'er Blooming*

You can find it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Clv6R-gvmQg>