

2nd Sunday of Advent “Spiritual Lessons Offered by a Stump”

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Yikes! That was a rather graphic Gospel reading wouldn't you say? Like I shared with you last week, there are two themes to the season of Advent. The first theme is a preparation of our souls for Christ's return at the end of time, very much what our Gospel reading compels us to think about this weekend. The second theme calls us to remember the events surrounding Jesus' birthday. As you know, the desire to celebrate Jesus' birthday this time of year many times overshadows the first theme drawing our attention to Christ's return at the end of time. However, I like to focus my homily this Sunday on a good way to prepare for both themes of Advent and this begins with a reflection on that stump we heard about in our first reading from Isaiah.

I am haunted by the words of Isaiah in the first reading. He talks about Israel as the stump of Jesse. Now think about what a stump looks like. A stump is lifeless. A stump is dead, sometimes rotting. This is Isaiah's commentary on how Israel was doing at the time, accentuating the need for salvation. On the other hand, it is also a good commentary on how our souls can feel like inside sometimes. My friends, I know as much as we do our best to deck the halls this time of year and try to be merry, there are many of us who in fact can struggle this time of year, primarily because there are areas in any person's life that can be a lot like that stump, lifeless, dead and rotting. We all have areas in our lives that are at times like that stump, lifeless, dead and rotting. Painful memories of things we had to go through, painful things we have done to others or what others have done to us, and the grief that comes from loss or even disappointment....these are all like a painful rotten stump that can just sit on the soul rotting.

When we are conscious of these stumps in our life, we can develop a habit of trying to avoid thinking about them. I think a lot of addictions get started from trying to self-medicate ourselves from these stumps rotting away inside. When we are conscious of our hurts this time of year, the invitation is to turn to Jesus and welcome him into our hearts. What happens when we let the light of Christ's incarnation onto these stumps? Isaiah says a shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse, and from his roots a bud shall blossom.

You see, my friends, when we let Christ the light to shine on the stumps eating away at our souls, new life erupts from these stumps. Notice that Isaiah doesn't suggest that the stumps will ever go away. I for one appreciate his honesty. He just suggest that through the power of God, stumps can be transformed into something that is life giving. Like we might see on a forest walk, a stump becomes a nursing log that can bear new life. So can it be with the stumps we have lying around in our souls.

Advent suggests that these stumps inside can become sources of life if we allow the light of Christ to shine on them. I have seen this with recovered addicts who become sponsors for others, leading them to the light. I have seen this with people who have experienced tragedy who because of their relationship with Christ become lifelines to others later on, leading them to the light. And so, we are invited to consider, what are our stumps? What is your stump this Advent season? Can you allow the light of Christ shine on your stumps? This is a powerful question to consider this time of year.

The second image that is so powerful in our readings this Sunday is the image of a farmer separating the wheat from the chaff. Although this is an image that calls to mind the final judgement, there is also useful spiritual advice here that is particularly helpful this time of year. St. John the Baptist is giving us an opportunity to perform an examination of our lives to consider the good that is happening in our lives that should be celebrated like the wheat in the gospel reading. We are also given an opportunity to consider the areas in our lives that are a lot like that chaff, spiritual garbage that is weighing us down keeping us from the joy God wants for us. Just like we house clean every so often and make that drive to St. Vincent de Paul or Goodwill or perhaps just to the dump, it is helpful this time of year to clean out our souls of that which is keeping us from the joy Christ wants for us as his disciples.

And so, John the Baptist tells us this Sunday how to begin this process of healing. He is calling us to repent in our Gospel reading and this word for repent in Greek, as you may recall, is far richer in meaning than the English word for repent. The Greek word for repent is metanoia...remember this? "Meta" means transcend and "Nous" means mind, and so the call to metanoia is an invitation to consider that our current way of thinking about our lives might be wrong and our biggest hurdle from entering into this season with peace and joy. Advent calls each one of us to transcend our thinking and embrace a new world view, enlightened by

the light of Christ. Repentance invites us to leave the old way of thinking and doing behind so to embrace a new way of thinking and doing that gives us life, hope, and peace.

And so, we have lit the second candle. The scriptures this Sunday challenge us to welcome the Lord's light into our souls so to burn away the chaff that is weighing us down right now. We are invited to allow Jesus to shine his light into our souls onto the stumps we carry inside so that new life can sprout forth from them. As we make our pilgrim journey towards Christmas, we hear a voice in the wilderness to make straight the way of the Lord.