

**SAN MARINO CONGREGATIONAL  
UNITED CHURCH OF CHRIST**

**Reflections by Pastor Donald Shenk**  
(Delivered on Sunday, December 4, 2016)

Texts:

**Isaiah 11:1-10 (*The Inclusive Bible*)**

Then a shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse; from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom."

The Spirit of Yahweh will rest on you—a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of counsel and strength, a spirit of knowledge and reverence for Yahweh.

You will delight in obeying Yahweh, and you won't judge by appearances, or make decisions by hearsay.

You will treat poor people with fairness and will uphold the rights of the land's downtrodden.

With a single word you will strike down tyrants; with your decrees you will execute evil people.

Justice will be the belt around this your waist—faithfulness will gird you up.

Then the wolf will lie down with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the lion cub will graze together, and a little child will lead them.

The cow will feed with the bear; their young will lie down together. The lion will eat hay like the ox. The baby will play next to the den of the cobra, and the toddler will dance over the viper's nest.

There will be no harm, no destruction anywhere in my holy mountain, for as water fills the sea, so the land will be filled with knowledge of Yahweh.

On that Day, the Root of Jesse will serve as a symbol to the peoples of the world—nations will flock to you, and your home will be a place of honor.

**Matthew 3:1-12 (*The Inclusive Bible*)**

At this time John the Baptizer appeared in the desert of Judea, proclaiming, "Change your hearts and minds, for the reign of heaven is about to break in upon you!"

It was John that the prophet Isaiah described when he said, "A herald's voice cries in the desert: 'Prepare the way of our God, make straight the paths of God!'"

John was clothed in a garment of camel's hair and wore a leather belt around his waist. Grasshoppers and wild honey were his food.

At that time, Jerusalem, all Judea and the whole region around the Jordan were going out to him. John baptized them in the Jordan River as they confessed their sins. When he saw that many of the Pharisees and Sadducees were coming to be baptized, John said to them, "You pack of snakes!" Who told you to flee from the coming wrath? Give some evidence that you mean to reform! And don't pride yourselves on the claim, 'Sarah and Abraham are our parents.' I tell you, God can raise children for Sarah and Abraham from these very stones!

Even now the ax is laid to the root of the tree. Every tree that is not fruitful will be cut down and thrown into the fire. I will baptize you in water if you have a change of heart, but the One who will follow me is more powerful than I. I'm not fit even to untie the sandals of the Coming One! That One will baptize you in the Holy Spirit and fire, whose winnowing-fan will clear the threshing floor. The grain will be gathered into the barn, but the chaff will be burned in unquenchable fire."

**Reflections by Pastor Donald: "Stumping for Growth"**

About 4 big blocks from me way over yonder in Temple City, there is a house with a tree. It's a rather unusual house, surrounded by all kinds of plants and pots, garden angels and whirlygigs. This used to be one of my favorite places to pass on my morning walks as I thought it had the most

beautiful tree in the whole neighborhood. Since there aren't any overhead power lines on that block, this tree was allowed to grow unencumbered to its full and glorious height. In fact, it dominated the whole neighborhood and gave great shade to the funny little house and the many little creatures that climbed in it and made it their home. It looked like the living example of one of those lollipop trees we all drew as children with a straight sturdy trunk and a nearly impossibly round canopy.

And then one day... it was gone. I hadn't walked over there for a couple of weeks, and when I made that route again, I was completely floored to see that someone had cut down that extraordinary and magnificent tree that must have taken many, many years to become the powerful presence it was in that neighborhood.

What could have possessed somebody to cut down something so magnificent? Did it have a disease I wasn't aware of? Could it have been damaged in some way I couldn't see? Or did the person who lived in that strange little house figure his or her lawn ornaments weren't getting enough light and so decided to take action? I don't really want to know, to tell you the truth, since I would have to dig deep to find forgiveness and grace in my heart if it was simply for aesthetic reasons, if you know what I mean.

As I considered today's text from Isaiah, I had to recall that tree and the enormous stump it left behind. At first, that stump only reminded me of what had been, but as time went on, and my grieving somewhat subsided, I began to notice something else happening.

Let's look at that first verse again that Faith read so dramatically for us. "Then a SHOOT will sprout from the stump of Jesse," it says, "from Jesse's roots, a branch will blossom." Hmm. A shoot, huh? But how could a shoot from some old cut down stump produce anything as beautiful as what had grown there before. And how could a branch blossom from roots?

Well, just like this (slide of neighborhood tree stump with two huge shoots coming out of it).

This is what's happened in the last couple of years since that magnificent tree was cut down. Not quite as stunning and powerful and majestic as that old tree, but look at these two lovely shoots pointing straight up to the sky, promising new growth and spreading their young branches so that what is to come may even take some future gen-x'ers breath away when they walk down that block. (Or, of course, they may just cut them down again. I'm a realist as well as an optimist.)

And yet, all that being said, I have to wonder as I gaze at those two new shoots what is it that will come from them and how will they fulfill the promise of what came before and is still pulsing away there as those ancient roots give them energy and say, "I'm not done with you yet you old stump!" How will the neighborhood be changed by their presence? What new creatures will find their way to this place and how will they let the light in or keep it out?

Maybe there are times in our lives when we have to be cut down. Maybe there are some ideas and some habits and some old resentments that we've allowed to blossom so fully and so completely that they may present a picture of health and heartiness to those who gaze upon our lives from the outside, while inside we know and certainly God knows that there is something that needs to be pruned away, stripped off or even cut completely down and out in order for the new and tender shoots of understanding, gentleness and openness to appear and take root.

Maybe what's old has to pass, even though there's a lot of good in it and a lot to be learned from it, so that something else may be shown to us, something new can be learned, and something we never dreamt possible can be revealed.

In our gospel for today, Matthew has John chastising the people of the church coming to him for baptism telling them, among other things, to "bear fruit worthy of repentance," because even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees ready to cut down whatever does not bear fruit. In other words, ready yourselves for the transformation that is to come by being transformed yourselves and looking

deeply into your hearts and souls for that which needs to be changed. Perhaps the whole “tree” of the way you see yourself and move in this world will need to be cut down, so that something new may grow in its place and bear the fruit needed to feed the souls of the new kin-dom.

Shalom is the Hebrew word often translated in English as “peace,” our Seasons of the Spirit curriculum shared with us this week as we studied our texts in LEAP of Faith on Wednesday. “Though,” they tell us there, “[Shalom’s] meaning [is much broader than just the word “peace” might convey, and] encompasses the healthy wholeness of life that God desires for all creation.”

“Isaiah,” they state, “uses two surprising and unlikely images – live shoots from dead stumps and predators co-existing in peace with prey – to describe a vision of shalom that comes from God’s power and promise to transform. Living into this vision presents opportunities that surprise us with transformation and hope.”

“What does God’s promise of shalom look like for us today?” they ask us. “What transformations might we be called to make, in our own lives, or in the world? What visions of hope and peace do you have during this Advent season?”

Our UCC theologian Kate Matthews picks up on these questions and asks us some as well – “What makes you get up in the morning, and move through your day, and, at times, deal with discouragement, injustice, and despair?” she inquires. “What are you moving toward, and what carries you toward it? If you could describe your greatest longing for your community, this nation, and the world, what would it be? What sort of leadership do the church and society and our families long for? What is the “stump” that seems to sit squarely in the middle of our life together? How is God moving in your midst, drawing up from the stump a hopeful shoot, new life, new promise, new hope?”

The Advent season is the perfect time to be asking ourselves these questions. As we drape our altar and pulpit and lectern and even ourselves in purple at this time of year, we are reminded of that other season to come in this new church year – Lent – where the purple is again brought out and we remind ourselves of the sacrifice made and ask ourselves questions of what we need to remove from our lives so that the promise of Easter may blossom anew in us.

Here in Advent, of course, we are awaiting the birth of something – someone – new. And we rejoice knowing that which is cut down will rise again and the new birth will happen in us and in our world if we believe, love, hope and place our faith in the One who is always bringing new growth and everlasting greenness to our lives.

In his essay, “Reclaiming Repentance” this week, Dr. David Lose exhorts us to take a moment during this Advent time to daydream what God’s vision would be for us. What, that is, do you think God wants you to be and to do?

“Daydream,” he writes, “may be the key word here, because God invites us to dream something beyond what we can presently see. In some ways, that is exactly what the Isaiah passage ... is [saying] – God’s dream about a different world where there is no predator or prey, no fear or hatred. It’s not a goal to be achieved, but a dream by which to set a course.

Second, “choose one – just one! – element of your life of which you would like to repent – that is, change direction – and name this Advent as a time to do that.” As I mentioned in my reflections last week for that first Sunday in Advent and Dr. Lose takes further here...

“Is there an unhealthy relationship you want to repair or address? Can you imagine using your time differently and toward better ends? Is there some practice or habit you might take up that would produce more abundant life for you or those around you?”

And, finally, see “if you can identify one element of our communal lives that needs repentance and to think how you can contribute to that. Can you spend time volunteering at a local charitable agency [or volunteering through one of the many activities we make available here]? Can we make

an additional donation? Can we get to know someone who is quite different from ourselves – ethnically or politically or generationally – and try to build a more robust community in this way? Can you identify one communal issue and begin praying for it daily, open to how God might direct your time and actions to contributing to change?”

This is not a guilt trip, but a growth trip. These questions can lead us to fuller lives, brighter futures and more loving communities. Looking into our own lives for where we can promote more growth and, perhaps, cut out that which is preventing it from happening, we contribute to the fullness of God’s kin-dom and help to bring about love and peace where there wasn’t any before.

**Drive Me Deep to Face Myself** (adapted)  
by Ted Loder

Lord, grant me your peace,  
for I have made peace  
with what does not give peace,  
and I am afraid. Drive me deep now,  
to face myself so I may see that what I truly need to fear is  
my capacity to deceive  
and willingness to be deceived,  
my loving of things  
and using of people,  
my struggle for power and shrinking of soul,  
my addiction to comfort  
and sedation of conscience,  
my readiness to criticize  
and reluctance to create,  
my clamor for privilege  
and silence at injustice,  
my seeking for security  
and forsaking the kingdom.

Lord, grant me your peace. Instill in me such fear of you  
as will begin to make me wise, and such quiet courage  
as will enable me to begin to make hope visible,  
forgiving delightful, loving contagious,  
faith liberating, peace-making joyful  
and myself open and present to other people  
and your kingdom.

Amen.