

The prophet Isaiah certainly has a way with words. Some of the most beautiful and beloved passages of the whole Bible come from his book. Passages that we probably even know by heart, and several of which we have heard throughout this Christmas season. And Isaiah chapter 11 is really no different. It is a beautiful passage speaking about the shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse and the spirit of the Lord resting on him so that he will rule over his people in righteousness and in justice. But we shouldn't let the beauty of this passage blind us to what Isaiah is saying here. Because note that he says that "a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse." In other words, the tree of Jesse has been cut down and all that remains for years on end is a seemingly dead stump. And it is from that dead stump that the shoot comes forth. So we have to ask ourselves this day. What exactly does Isaiah mean by the tree of Jesse? Why did the Lord cut it down? And what does it mean that the shoot comes forth from that stump? And what does it mean for us today? Those are the questions we want to focus on as we look at our Old Testament reading for today.

So what does Isaiah mean by the tree of Jesse? Well, he's using it in a way that we often use when we talk about our family trees, right? From generation to generation, the branches that spread out which form the tree that makes up our individual families. And the tree of Jesse is the same thing. All of his descendants which are coming forth from him. We even talked about this on Christmas Eve at our children's program, where they talked about God's family tree leading from Jesse all the way down to Jesus. But it's important to note here that Isaiah is not talking about absolutely every one of Jesse's descendants. No, he has in mind here a very specific line that is coming forth from him. Because Jesse, of course, is the father of David. And David was made king by the Lord and made to be the king who would go on forever. And the Lord made a promise to him in 2 Samuel chapter 7, that after him would come a son who would sit on his throne. And he would reign in his place and that kingdom would go on forever. Now, he also promised him at the same time that he would have a great house. There would be many sons would all reign in his place. And God kept that promise all the way from David down to Josiah and his sons. An unbroken line of kings that made up the mighty house of David. That was the tree of Jesse. That's what Isaiah is talking about.

But God cut that tree down. The kings came to an end. And for many many years after Josiah and his sons, there was no king in Israel. Well, why? Why would God cut down this tree which he had set up? We find the answer in a figure that we have met several times throughout the Christmas season, the figure of King Ahaz. Ahaz whom we met in Isaiah chapter 7 where he is dealing with a very real problem. Ahaz is facing a military alliance against him. The northern kingdom and the kingdom of Syria have banded together and they are threatening to invade his kingdom. And so Ahaz is trying to figure out: "How am I going to solve this problem? How am I going to get out of this mess? What am I going to do?"

Now Ahaz could have turned to the Lord. He could have turned to God who delivers his people time and time again. Because God in the past did some amazing things for his people when they called on him. Think of Gideon, for example, in the book of Judges, who with his 300 men defeated an entire army of Midianites. Or you think of the million man army from Ethiopia in 2 Chronicles which was defeated by the much smaller army of Israel. When God's people trust in him, God delivers them from every trial. David knew that. David called on the Lord time and time again in all of his troubles with Saul and all of the things that he struggled with. And God

helped him. All Ahaz would have to do to find the solution to his problems would be to go to the Lord, to call on him, and to find the help that he needed.

But Ahaz didn't want to do that. Ahaz wanted to do things his way. He was going to find help anywhere else than the Lord. And that's why we learn in passages like 2 Kings chapter 16 that Ahaz worshiped false gods. Ahaz even sacrificed his own children with fire to the god Moloch, all in an attempt to find help from anywhere other than the Lord. And to make it even worse, Ahaz even made an alliance of his own. He went to the king of Assyria and he made an alliance with him, giving him some things from the temple, some of the holy things of the Lord as a gift to win his favor. Ahaz was a wicked man. And for that reason and all of the other wicked sons of David, God cut down the tree of Jesse. The kings came to an end. And the house of Jesse would have to wait for a very, very long time.

Christians, when you see life's problems--either your own personal problems or the problems you see in society--where do you turn for help? Do you turn to the Lord, to call on him who has delivered his people time and time again? To call on him has promised to help us in every trouble? Or do you look for some personal solution or some worldly solution, anything that will help you to get through your times of trouble? That's a very easy thing to do, unfortunately, to seek the help of the world the way that Ahaz did. Because maybe when we're dealing with our problems, when we're dealing with trying to solve the world's problems, maybe we think, "Well I can solve problems by force. If I just have the strength to take care of myself or maybe even have the military strength to take care the world's problems, that would solve everything! We'll just beat it down and that's how were going to take care of this. If they made me king for a day, we would have all the problems gone by tomorrow, because I know how to fix everything. I know what we're going to do." But does that work? Is that really going to solve our problems? I mean after all, strength comes to an end, and solving things by force very often creates more trouble than it solves.

Well, maybe we'll say, OK. Well, maybe not by force. Maybe we'll find a political solution to all of this. If we all just gathered together and combined our resources, then we can find a way to fix this country or to fix my own personal problems. If we just had the right kind of government in place or if we just had the right laws in place, or if we just took care of this particular law, then everything would be great, right? We could fix poverty. We could take care of the hungry. We could solve all of society's problems. All we have to do is just get the right political solution. You hear that promise all the time. People who want to change our government into something else, all in a way of supposedly making heaven on earth. But does that work either, Christians? Just look at the corruption that is plaguing our government from top to bottom. Do you think we're really going to find a lasting solution from there? Or just think of the partisanship and the division from top to bottom, the way we're always seeming to be at each other's throats. Do we really think we're going to be able to make a heaven on earth? Probably not. In fact, we probably will make a hell on earth. Political solutions ultimately come to nothing.

Okay fine, we won't solve it by force and we won't solve it with politics. Maybe we'll just ignore it, right? It's someone else's problem. Somebody else can deal with it. Let the world take care of itself. I'm gonna focus on me and only me or maybe just my family, and we'll just sort of forget all the problems that we see around us. Then we'll be happy, right? But does that really work

either, Christians, just kind of sticking our head into the sand and hoping that it will all go away? Because trouble has a way of finding us even when we don't want it to, and ultimately that doesn't really solve any of the problems anyway, just pretending that they don't exist.

Okay, so maybe that won't work either. But maybe, just maybe, what we can do instead is to just get along. Let's just be nice to one another. Let's just take care of one another and we'll agree to disagree, and that's how we're going to solve everybody's problems, right? We'll just pretend they don't exist. But being nice, only goes so far, Christians because sometimes being nice leads us to deny the truth. And if we're denying the truth, that ends up actually creating a much bigger problem than we're trying to solve.

The problem with all of these solutions, Christians, is that they ultimately are seeking help either from ourselves or from the world. And when we are seeking help from ourselves or from the world, they will come to an end. They will fail. They will not give us the justice that we want or the peace that we want, because all worldly things will fail us in the end.

But this is where God comes in. And he brings to us this word today that "a shoot shall come forth from the stump of Jesse," a shoot which will be the solution to all of Israel's problems. Israel wanted peace, and they would find peace in this promised shoot from the stump of Jesse. They wanted to find all kinds of stability, and they would find in this king Jesus Christ. Because when he comes, Christians, he is the king that Israel needed, the king that no earthly king could be. Because think about what the wicked kings like Ahaz were like. They did not fear the Lord. They were godless men. But the Lord Jesus Christ feared his Father, going even to the cross to take our sins upon himself, and he was one who comes in righteousness, clothed with the Spirit himself, as we see in his baptism. The wicked kings of Israel perverted justice. They were really only interested in themselves and taking care of themselves. But King Jesus comes to give us real justice, to give us a real peace in the midst of all of this. He will not judge by what his eyes see or what his ears hear, but with righteousness he shall judge the poor and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. The wicked kings of Israel tried to solve all their problems with the sword. With force they were going to win peace. But the Lord Jesus Christ comes not with a sword, but with the living Word of God, sharper than any two edged sword. The Word which transforms not only ourselves, but also society. And it is this Word which comes to you today.

So Christians, when we have our own problems and we are seeking for solutions to those problems, call on the Lord Jesus. Call on him who can actually do something about it. Because he's going to take care of us. He is our fortress in the day of trouble. He is the one who will lead us out of our troubles, not only in this life, but especially at the end of days when he comes and put all things under his feet. And on that day death will be no more and there will be no more problems or crying or pain. And we will have a perfect society, one which will live in the light of the Lord forever. Call on King Jesus, Christians. Call on him who will save you, and he will deliver you from every trouble.

To him be the glory, now and forever. Amen.