*Sermon Text for December 8, 2013*

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Matthew 3:1-3, Isaiah 11:1-10

“Allowing the shoot to grow”

It has been a wonderful week and the saga of my first real hunting experience continues. I arrived at the cabin Sunday evening after a fairly long day, but I was ready. We woke up around 5 and I get my gear together with an adidas bag filled with rope, a hatchet, a saw, it was a drywall saw but that should work, my rifle and my chair. It was one of those with a cup holder so I figured it should be fine.

The three of us headed out and they positioned me between the two of them. I set up my chair, sat down, and fell right asleep. I was so cozy in my down jacket and my 12 layers of clothes, I didn’t see a deer the whole time. It was wonderful. It was getting close to 4 and I noticed that the person next to me was getting his stuff together, so I got up ready to put my stuff together when I heard bang. He wasn’t getting ready to go, he actually got a deer. I went over with Jeff Wymer and the three of us who had never shot a deer before stood over until I said, now what?

Then I remembered in my Adidas bag with the hatchet and drywall saw I had a book with me that tells you what to do once you shoot a deer. We followed it step by step and it worked. It was a great experience, it really was.

We have another image before us this second Sunday in Advent. I wanted to sit here and say, you know, this week’s sermon really has me stumped. The church has been transformed fro Advent hasn’t it? Even things we didn’t expect have been a bit turned upside down. Advent while it is a season of great expectations and anticipation is also, and especially today, a time when Jesus turns our expectations, good or bad, upside down. It is in his ability to give us hope even in the midst of the darkest of times, or in despair, that these Scriptures lift up.

Both of the these Scriptures today lead us to an Advent of anticipating the unexpected where God will bring about his kingdom, often in a way that is upside down: like a shoot growing out of a dead stump, or a voice coming from the wilderness, the dry, dead desert. Let’s read.

In Florence, Italy, along the Tuscan hillsides there is an old, ancient really, farmhouse, nestled in the hills. This house is now owned by a sister church of the Presbyterians, called the Waldensians. It is absolutely beautiful. But there is something a bit strange as you look over the countryside of grapes and olives. They don’t really have olive trees, but rather enormous olive bushes. These ancient trees, hundreds of years old, about 50 years ago experience an unseasonably warm December, in the high 50 and the sap was flowing when in the evening there was a 50 degree change in weather which froze the sap, popped the bark, and killed all of the trees.

They began cutting down the trees to at least use them for firewood, the region was destitute with its primary crop ruined. But one farmer noticed a shoot growing out of one of these trees, and today you have enormous olive bushes producing oil and olives, unlike probably anything else you’ve seen in the world.

Our first Scripture in Matthew is a familiar verse. A voice of God coming out of the wilderness. The Israeli wilderness is a desert that is as bleak as you can get. In Jesus’ day the only people who went to the wilderness were the outcasts, the lepers, certainly not messengers from God. Until John the Baptist comes along preaching from this dry arid land, this lifeless environment a message of repentance. Prepare ye the way of the Lord. The Kingdom of God is at hand.

Out of the bleakness, the hostile, unwelcoming, even dead environment is able to provide a word of hope and a future of life. We don’t give that which is without promise much hope. We abandon it, forget about it. But not God. He has the ability to put things together that don’t normally go together to produce life.

Friday I was on a conference call for a board that I serve on called Logos Place. It serves to help the work of the Moscow Protestant Chaplaincy were I served. The current chaplain spoke of this new project that they have going. They’ve bought or they are leasing a tract of land just outside of Moscow in order to farm it. Currently some Africans who are members of the church are farming it, they are from Cameroon, Nigeria, and Ghana. They realized that the land is very close to an area of Moscow where there is a neighborhood of Afghani refugees, many of whom receive food bags through the church through the UNHCR. So they were going to invite the Afghanis to partner with them to work alongside and share their crops.

Illegal African refugees in Moscow farming the frozen tundra so that it can be of use to Muslim Afghani refugees being helped by an American Christian Church which is associated with the US Embassy. It sounds like a Mad Lib. But each is an expression of the unexpected growing out of a situation of potential bleakness and despair in their individual realities in order to be able to provide hope.

As you can tell all of Advent we will be in Isaiah. We saw the words last week and we are encouraged to see them this week. Amazing images that are given to us, but everything is upside down. Nothing Isaiah gives us really happens in the real world. Or does it? A shoot growing out of a stump. Who has seen a sprig force itself onto a cement jungle in the city. It doesn’t make sense but it happens.

What about the scenery we are given of nature in Isaiah. How upside down and impossible is that? Woody Allen said it this way: “The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, but the lamb probably didn’t get much sleep.” Just like last week Isaiah the idealist comes crashing through leaving us breathless in his images, but disappointed because we leave church without anything practical to take home.

As if things could be that upside down in real life. Now way can a sprig grow out of a stump, or a sword be converted to a plow, or a jail in the heart of South Africa produce a man who after decades in that concrete cell comes out with a vision of peace and reconciliation for those who wanted him dead. He was a man like no other that we have seen in our lifetime. Mandela springs out of Isaiah as a sign of hope that springs from the darkest, deepest despair, and yet that seedling never lost its grip on reality and after decades sprang into life.

What Mandela was not possible. Who does that. Who forgives the one who spends decades torturing you? As if a stone, sealed on that good Friday could in any way be rolled away and the one tortured come out and give life and abundant life to all who would believe in him.

As if a pregnant teenager could ever carry her child to term, it would ruin her future, but her hope, her faith takes the bleakness of the situation and turns it into salvation for all of humanity. You know what. I’m no longer stumped. The Bible is actually filled with examples of God’s turning the inevitable ending into a future that can only have his signature on it.

We always try to impose our understanding of the world or life situations by writing the ending to our stories. Endings that cut off the shoots of hope, or eliminate the light to let it grow. A child leading the world? Really? Even if his name is Emmanuel they are our future, not our present. What a lie that is.

This church is full of shoots of potential that is growing and that needs to be encouraged and strengthened. My model for ministry is one where people embark on spirit led initiatives not because I am involved as the pastor, but because the Lord has given these visions to you as a people who hear that voice crying out from the wilderness.

What if we believe that these fragile signs around us are God’s beginning? Do you see the sign of being able to be involved in mission right here in our own backyard with feeding the hungry, housing the homeless, clothing the naked…Perhaps then we will tend the seedling in our heart, the place where faith longs to break through the hardness of our disbelief. Do not wait for the tree to be full grown. God comes to us in this Advent time and invites us to move beyond counting the rings of the past. We may still want to sit on the stump for a while, and God will sit with us. But God will also keep nudging us: “Look – Look, there on the stump. Do you see that shoot growing?

Isaiah isn’t really writing to us. He was writing to those facing issues of life and death every day. Not those who are worried about their kids or their spouses addicted to porn. Or those who are in jobs that are driving them crazy and sucking the life out of them and as a result are making them not much fun at home to be around. He’s not writing to those who can’t pay their bills each month and it just keeps piling up and getting worse and worse. He’s not writing to us in middle America. He’s not writing to those who are anxious and stressed about decisions looming for next year or even next month. He’s not writing to middle America and their tenuous relationships with their families as they try to understand the impact that social media has on the fabric of our families and society.

He’s writing to those in tents in the Philippines. To those living in a civil war in Lybia and Egypt, to those African living in Moscow wondering if they will be alive the next day to serve Afghans living 20 in an apartment in the most violent racist country in this planet.

Isaiah is not speaking to us as well…is he? Is there a shoot that is growing in those situations that we are facing as well, or is it just in life and death situations? Yet as Americans we are those who are able to keep the Mandelas in prison, or free him. I’m so proud that our denomination was one of the first to divest in the mid 1980’s. Bishop Desmond Tutu was a good friend of my father’s and I’ll never forget when he came to our house in New Jersey in the early 1980’s. I was a young teenager and all I remember is a man who could see hope in everything. Even in the darkness that his country was facing at that time.

Our Advent Scripture gives us hope that God will always allow a shoot to grow where people of faith are able to nourish and keep it growing. Be one that doesn’t quench the spirit, but rather allows God to find that sprig of hope growing in you so that you can truly change the world. Amen.