

A sermon delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 9, 2007, dedicated to the memory of Richard Gibson who died Wednesday, December 5, 2007, at 53 years old. Rich died too suddenly after a life well lived, and always to the glory of God!

“Isaiah 11: No Fighting, No Biting”

***Part II of VII in the Sermon Series:
“Isaiah’s Vision: To Welcome the Messiah!”
Isaiah 11: 1-10, Matthew 3:1-12***

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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As we enter Isaiah 11, the sociopolitical order of Jerusalem is dominated by a “stump.” Times are bleak and hope has been cutoff. However, the Stump encounters the religious and spiritual yearnings of Israel, which is powered by “the Spirit” - the “Ruach,” the breath of God. **We have the “Stump” and the “Spirit.”**

This stump in Isaiah 11 is not an ordinary stump of a backyard tree cut off at the base. This stump is the “Stump of Jesse.” You remember Jesse? He was King David’s father. David’s family tree was believed to be the carrier of God’s goodness, faithfulness and justice in the world. As Matthew’s gospel tells, it is from Jesse’s stump that the son of God will be born to liberate and free the people of Israel. Under the surface, this stump’s root system is producing the Messiah. Some stump! From this stump, a tiny branch appears. Hope begins to emerge from the depths of despair. So, while peace and justice had seemed cutoff from the tree of life,

it is not easy to destroy the spirit and justice of God. What was severed at the base is now growing a tiny branch. Life streams into our field of vision from a tiny shoot.

Enter “God’s Spirit.” God’s Spirit, in the poet’s words, is life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind, which can and will create utter newness! Walter Brueggemann writes of the Spirit: “The wind of God is inscrutable, irresistible, beyond human control, management, or predictability.” The wind has come to blow over the stump and bring new possibilities to life itself!

The contest between the stump and the wind of God’s Spirit is extremely significant. While the wind brings “Hope” and new possibilities, the stump is hopeless and often called – “realistic.” The poetic prophet knows that the stump cannot defeat the Spirit. Jerusalem will not be left bereft. It may not be seen in one generation, but the Spirit of God, which we are told is a Spirit of wisdom and understanding; a Spirit of counsel and power; a Spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord, will prevail.

This isn’t a fairy tale of yesteryear, a poem of previous people. I see the contest between the stump and the Spirit every day. In every workplace, in many homes, in every occupation, in many relationships, in most churches and synagogues, the struggle between stump and Spirit is classic and ongoing.

Stumps sever hope. Stumps look at situations and those who would find ways to create and recreate new life and announce them to be “dreamers” and “unrealistic.” Stumps never leave the earth. In fact, stumps are as close to the earth as dead leaves and grass. Stumps can’t see the stars and feel the refreshing breeze of the Spirit. They are tied to the soil.

The Spirit, on the other hand lives in the stars! The Spirit relies on creativity, delight, love, joy and hope. Spirit, when buried, finds a way to surface in shoots from the stump. Granted, the shoots of the Spirit are often so tiny and insignificant that they remain unnoticed and unrecognized – they are often hard to perceive.

At some time or another every one of us has been stumped. The question becomes – what do we do when we are stumped? Brian Kellett just graduated on Friday from CCAD. He was honored in the winter graduation as one of the top students. He is a gifted photographer. In his senior year in high school, Brian was in a serious accident that left him paralyzed from the waist down. He says that for a while he was “stumped.” He was depressed. But, then he decided to make the most of his life. Four months ago, he welcomed the freshmen class of the College of Art & Design (CCAD) in a ceremony also here in our sanctuary.

He told of his internship in Italy this past summer. “Italy was great! Not really a wheelchair accessible country – but I had a great time. On my first day, I arrived at my summer apartment to discover I was on the second floor with no elevator. Each day I dragged my wheelchair up and down the stairs. I adapted.” Then he added, “If I can drag myself up and down stairs to have a great summer internship in Italy, all of you will find a way to have a great time at CCAD.” A shoot rising from the stump! After the graduation ceremony on Friday, I saw Brian again. He said, “Hey, I heard you are a Yale man. I am heading out there for graduate school. What can you tell me about it?” I said, “Well, it is beautiful and not very wheelchair accessible.” With a huge smile he said, “Hey, it can’t be any worse than Italy!” Brian Kellett Is the Spirit of God alive in this world!

I love National Geographic specials. One of my favorite features is the time-delayed pictures. You know what I mean - they set a camera in one position and photograph a plant for months. Then they fly through its growth in a minute or less. We see this amazing

plant come out of the earth and into full form instantaneously. What has taken months - we see in a flash! The Spirit is at work in the growth of the plant in small and seemingly insignificant ways. But, growth is happening. The stump denies what the Spirit is doing! But, the stump cannot stop the Spirit from doing it!

We see this in our children. It seems like yesterday, I held some of your babies in my arms and baptized them. They were so tiny then. They seemed so vulnerable. In your newborn child, I held God's Spirit in a physical form we call a "baby." But, from this little tiny shoot of life, God has given growth, development, laughter, love, delight, joy, intelligence, playfulness, brilliance, song, dance, creativity and possibility arising each day and growing so beautifully right before our eyes.

If we could place a camera in one position and photograph the entirety of life emerging, what an amazing image we would have - from the seed of life to the end of days - the Spirit of God outdistances our imagination. While we are busy being stumped and stumping others, God is busy (in God's infinite Glory) creating and renewing life in the power of God's spirit! God's possibility far-outstretches our limitations. God will not be stumped!

Isaiah, God's poet with a prophetic imagination, goes on to create even more powerful images of justice and righteousness embracing. The Spirit of God will produce lasting justice - not just momentary acts of equity or arbitrary interventions of kindness. God will not just look at given situations and listen to words people say. Like the Judge of the Universe, God will **grant decisions** for the poor **of the earth – decisions which are based on real need, not just what people say.**

In addition, God will take off the military garb of past generations and with the coming of the Messiah, God will have a belt of righteousness and a sash of faithfulness. I don't know about you, but this God of Isaiah is looking a lot like Jesus of Nazareth! This Spirit, which has stumped the stump, bears a striking resemblance to the Messiah from the manger of Bethlehem!

But, the poet and our God are not yet done. "He launches into a lyrical celebration of newness that is as broad and as large as all of creation" (Brueggemann). He describes a natural order in which the oldest of enemies - wolves and lambs, leopards and kids, calves and lions, cows and bears, lions and oxen - all will be friends with one another. While we think it impossible, the winds of newness are blowing across creation. And it is "the little child" (the shoot from Jesse's stump) who will preside over this creative reordering of life. With this Messiah of God - new innocence, trust, gentleness and friendship become possible. The new creation is ordered in such a way that those who were fragile and vulnerable are esteemed and given hope.

In her wonderful children's book *No Fighting, No Biting*, Else Holmelund Minarik and illustrator, Maurice Sendak tell the story of two children who encounter two alligators - Light-Foot and Quick-Foot. As the mother of the children tells the story, we see the alligators picking on each other. They are always fighting and biting. In the end, they learn to play nicely together - but not without a struggle.

Isaiah's vision is one in which there is no more fighting and biting. He envisions a time when human injustice ends. We know from life on this planet, that human injustice against other people wreaks havoc in global stability. We also see how human injustice and indifference destroys God's earth as well. Global greenhouse gas effects, the destruction of the Amazon's rainforest, and the real and measurable melting of the Arctic and Antarctic's ice, all point to our capacity as a human race to negatively affect the earth.

Nevertheless, we also have the capacity to positively affect the earth as well. For example, by reversing carbon emissions, we are already beginning to see how the earth begins to heal and replenish itself.

Make no mistake about this. We need the stump and Spirit in this world. Like the Ying needs the Yang and light needs darkness - we need both in the creative, synergetic interaction of Life.

But, new possibilities for justice and peace in human relations and all creation depend on the Spirit blowing - a Spirit which cannot and will not be stumped. The wind is blowing.

Advent is our decision to trust God's Spirit, God's "Ruach," God's life-sustaining breath and wind against the hopeless stump of what has failed so far. Watch out for the shoot - it is rising up ever so slowly in the midst of descending December darkness. Amen.