

*A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent II, December 8, 2013, dedicated to my Aunt Ruth Ahrens Klingler and my Uncle Edison, to the memory of Nelson Mandela; and to Kevin Jones and all the choirs of First Church as they present Lessons and Carols today and always to the glory of God!*

# **“The Stump and the Spirit!”**

***Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; 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 is “God’s Stump.”** This is the “*Stump of Jesse.*” Do 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 out of 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 cut-off 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 little branch. Life streams into our field of vision from a tiny shoot.

### **Enter “the Spirit!” Actually - “God’s Spirit.”**

In the poet Isaiah's words, God's spirit is *“life-giving, future-creating, world-forming, despair-ending power and wind, which can create an utter newness!”* (Walter Brueggemann, Texts for Preaching, Year A, Westminster, John Knox Press, 1995, Louisville, KY, p.11). Walter Brueggemann writes of the Spirit: *“The wind of God is inscrutable, irresistible, beyond human control, management, or predictability”* (Ibid). The wind has come to blow over the stump and bring new possibilities to life itself!

### **There is a battle between the stump and spirit.**

This battle is extremely significant. While the wind brings “Hope” and new possibilities, the stump is hopeless and often called - “realistic.” In his heart and in his verse, 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. The struggle between “stumps” and “spirits” happen everywhere in the world every day – in the interactions of people and in the human heart. In every workplace, in many homes, in every calling, every vocation, in many relationships, in churches, mosques and synagogues, the struggle between the Stump and the Spirit is classic and ongoing. The key link between Stump and Spirit is to

always discover the “Shoot of Spirit Hope” that rises from seemingly dead Stump.

Let’s look a little closer.... Stumps are realists. (That is not to say that realists are only Stumps...) They are down close to the ground. 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 that often cover them. Stumps can’t see the stars and feel the refreshing breeze of the Spirit. They are tied to the sod and not so much to free flowing expressions of poets and visionaries. There is a Stump in every single one of us – although some of us don’t like to acknowledge our stumps...

The Spirit, on the other hand, is loose and free. The Spirit lives in the stars and in the air we breathe! The Spirit relies on creativity, delight, love, joy and hope. When cut-off, the Spirit 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 – but we have shoots of the spirit, too.

The question becomes – ***what do you do when you are stumped?***

This week, we were given a look deep inside this question as the world stopped to mourn the death of Nelson Mandela at 95 years old. When Mandela entered a small prison cell on Robben Island in the winter of 1964, he was stumped. The 46 year old Mandela would spend 18 of his 27 prison years in that cell. Confined to this small cell, the floor his bed, a bucket for a toilet, he was forced to do hard labor in a quarry. He was allowed one visitor a year for 30 minutes. He could write and receive one letter every six months.

But the prison cell on Robben Island became the crucible which transformed him. It was the place where the root of justice grew from the stump of injustice. Through his intelligence, charm and dignified defiance, Mandela eventually bent even the most brutal prison officials to his will, assumed leadership over his jailed comrades and became the master of his own prison. He emerged from it the mature leader who would fight and win the great political battles that would create a new democratic South Africa.

In The Long Walk to Freedom, Nelson Mandela wrote, *“No one is born hating another person because of the color of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite.”* In fact, *“Resentment is like drinking poison and then hoping it will kill your enemies.”*

In the end of Long Walk Mandela writes,  
*“I have walked that long road to freedom. I have tried not to falter; I have made missteps along the way. But I have discovered the secret that after climbing a great hill, one only finds that there are many more hills to climb. I have taken a moment here to rest, to steal a view of the glorious vista that surrounds me, to look back on the distance I have come. But I can only rest for a moment, for with freedom come responsibilities, and I dare not linger, for my long walk is not ended.”*

Nelson Mandela was the shoot rising from the Stump – filled with the Spirit of God!

Years ago, I was in Memphis, visiting the site of Martin Luther King’s assassination. There with The Rev. Dr. Samuel “Billy” Kyles, I was able to see the place where Dr. King breathed his last breath. Billy was with Dr. King on the balcony the evening he was murdered. He had gone by the Lorraine Hotel to pick-up Dr. King and others and to take them to his home for dinner. He told how Dr. King lost his life fighting for the rights of African-American garbage collectors. But he also shared Nelson Mandela story.

When he brought then President of South Africa, Nelson Mandela to the second floor balcony on which King was assassinated; Mandela took off his shoes and asked everyone else to do the same. He said to everyone, *“We are standing on Holy Ground.”* He then got on his hands and knees, bent down and kissed the place where Dr. King died. He crumbled and began to cry. He finally grabbed Billy and pulled him down on the balcony floor. He told Billy, *“The worst day I had on Robbins Island was the day I heard Dr. King had been murdered. I lost hope that day. Then I began to pray. I heard his voice say to me, you are not alone. Do not ever give up. From that on, I began to rise with a new spirit. I have always dreamed I would come to this balcony. But I never imagined I would live long enough to make it.”*

The Spirit of God rising from the stump. Mandela lived a Transformed Life in the Spirit of God! He was (as I wrote in a poem about him on Friday) “God’s beam of light cast upon the earth for 95 years!” Thanks be to God for life and witness of Nelson Mandela!

Shifting to ground level, I don’t know about you, but 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 can’t time-delay cameras on people, because we are moving all the time. But, we see the stump to spirit growth in our children – don’t we? 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. As I see it, this God of Isaiah is looking a lot like Jesus of Nazareth! This Spirit, which has overcome 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 (Isaiah) launches into a lyrical celebration of newness that is as broad and as large as all of creation” (Ibid, p.12).* 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. In a sense, he creates a time when the Stump and the Spirit are united by the Shoot of God's justice. 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 the Stump and Spirit 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.

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 nurtured by God's light in the midst of descending December darkness. Amen.

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