

So, December! And people are beginning to decorate. I've glimpsed the lights of Christmas trees in the windows of a few houses. We'll probably get our tree next weekend. It's a high stressful time for us. We cannot pick out a good Christmas tree. We've had trees with big gaps absent of branches, trees that will not stand up no matter what we do, we've had crooked trees, we've gotten a tree home only to realize that it is already starting to turn brown, two years ago we had a tree that was so big we had to squeeze by it to get into the living room. And the buying experience, I feel like we're at a used car lot. I can almost hear the thoughts of the salesman as he ties our tree to the car roof, "Whew, I never thought we'd get rid of that one."

It's more ego than it is logistical. Once we've managed to corral the tree into the stand and let go, holding our breath, once we've hung all the lights and the decorations and placed the angel, well, it's a Christmas tree – and the room looks magical and festive.

But, even our pathetic trees seem more alive and beautiful than the stump of Jesse Isaiah refers to. Jesse was the Father of David - the shepherd boy God chose to rule Israel. King David's reign was a long and stable one. He was handsome and talented and brave. He was the Jack Kennedy of his time - and with some of Jack Kennedy's flaws as well. His reign included sex scandals and family rebellion, wars and in-fighting, but to the people King David's presence for over 40 years was comforting. He gave the country, the people, an identity. His presence on the throne was an icon of the era.

Two hundred years after David's reign, the prophet Isaiah is speaking to a people who have given up hope. The Kings that followed David not only lacked his charisma; they were corrupt, incompetent, and egotistical to the point of endangering the people which ended in slaughter and exile. They longed for another King David. They were bereft and directionless and they had lost their faith and dependence on God as well. God called the prophet Isaiah to bring them back to Him. So in much of Isaiah, he is haranguing them about their immoral behavior and the absence of an allegiance to God. But he also encouraged them with a description of the Messiah to come.

The Messiah they expected – an earthly ruler – would be from the lineage of David. This new King would not arrive with chariots and regal robes, he would emerge from a stump – the stump of what's left since David's death – a short squat seemingly dead remnant of a once glorious tree.

I wonder how many people took comfort from this description. They have been yearning for reunion, for restoration, for so long that hoping may feel foolish, worse, it makes them vulnerable. A stump is anything but reassuring.

As I have been living with this scripture over the last couple of weeks, I admit that the stump looked pretty dead to me. And the idyllic world of lion and lamb Isaiah describes looked pretty fanciful. How can I urge us to work towards this world – of love and trust and co-existence – now, in a time where separation and suspicion turn us against one another? How can we envision laying down our weapons – our bitter words and our arrogant contempt? Can we take our eye off our enemy even for a moment? Can our nature – our desire to be right, or to be best, or to be strong, to be in control – can we change that nature? Our human nature? Really, will you let your child play with a rattlesnake?

No, of course not, not in this world. Not in this time when we can't even name the fear and hate that have a hold on us.

But we are in Advent – a time that isn't about the world as it is, but about the world as God intends it to be. We, who wait for Christ, we are not tied to the despair of today. When we see through worldly eyes, there is no way I'm letting my lamb near that lion. But when we see through Advent eyes, expectant eyes, hopeful ones, we know that there can be a new world, a different world where strength and power come from our surrendering to God; where the roots of hate are unmasked to reveal the fear that we won't be loved; where a humble stable is a palace; a manger a throne.

It's Advent and our homes sparkle with decorations that in one way manifest our joy and in another help create and nourish it. I love it once our decorations are up and our tree is camouflaged with lights and tinsel. Especially at night when the lights make everything glimmer, part of me feels like I'm in another time, another place - a modest, but stately Victorian home, with happy and respectful servants, plum pudding and a large but tastefully wrapped box under the tree with my name on it. There was a time when I imagined a mink coat inside, but I know I'm not supposed to want that anymore. The decorations are like a movie set, feeding a vague fantasy.

So, the last thing I want in the middle of my carefully crafted Christmas is a stump. I suppose I could decorate it with little elves, but even then - a stump, a smelly barn, unwashed shepherds, donkeys, do these really belong in Christmas? I guess I want the path to Christ, the road to

transformation, to be lined with tinsel trees and accompanied by angel choirs.

I don't think I realized how the lights, and the tinsel, and the decorations actually distance me from Christ's path. The first time I walk through our de-Christmased downstairs, I feel let down. The set, the props, the visuals are gone. The only remnants are a few pine needles strewn about. The tree itself lies abandoned at the roadside, exposed for what it is, discarded, rootless, dead. And left behind there's just a stump. But then, then my eyes are not dazzled by tinsel and they can see clearly. There is a shoot coming out of that stump. It is not dead. It's alive. It has roots, roots that go right to the center of existence.

And once I make friends with the shoot, the things I have been decorating myself with – status and knowledge; the feeling of superiority that contributes to the great divide that is pulling us apart – once I concentrate on the stump, the shoot, the Messiah, Christ, those trappings, those false selves, false securities fall away. And things that seem universal and inevitable, a lion always eats a lamb; a child will always be bitten by a snake; when one country flourishes another fades; these no longer seem like absolutes, destiny. Hallelujah, we are not condemned to follow the worst of our human nature. There is hope and the path to it is through a barn and a stump and a tender shoot, a baby - new and full of hope. And, I find once I allow that baby to order my days, once we allow Christ to be the guiding spirit of each day, every encounter, all decisions, that the frisson and fantasy of Christmas, the feelings which we think are connected to the trappings return. It wasn't a movie set, it was sort of a green room, nurturing our joy while we wait to encounter the one who sustains it and fuels it and uses it to transform us so that our joy may help transform the world. To make space for the lamb to curl up against the warmth of the lion.

This Advent what will you put as the center of your Christmas celebrations? Surely they will include a tree - gnarled or perfect, glowing and glistening. But at the heart, might you bring this stump inside, place it where it should be – in the center, of your celebration, of your heart, of your life.