

**SWEET THE TIMBER**  
**Isaiah 11:1-9**

*A sermon given by Larry R. Hayward, on Christmas Eve, December 24, 2019, at Westminster Presbyterian Church, Alexandria, Virginia.*

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*A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

*He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,  
and a little child shall lead them.  
The cow and the bear shall graze,  
their young shall lie down together;  
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.  
The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,  
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.  
They will not hurt or destroy  
on all my holy mountain;  
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord  
as the waters cover the sea.*

*Prayer: Richard Niebuhr once said: "We sought a good to love and were found by a good who loved us." Lord, may the voices of children and choir, of sermon and scripture bear witness to the good who in Christ has loved us. In his name we pray. Amen.*

I.

A few weeks ago my wife Presbyterian clergy wife and I talking in the kitchen about upcoming sermons and worship services this season. She asked: "What do you think draws people to worship on Christmas Eve?" My answer was *beauty*. Hers was *peace*.

She is probably right. The most *beautiful* story that draws *us* to *this* place *this* night – and draws others to similarly-named places around the world – is Luke’s story of the birth of Christ. But its most memorable words are less a tribute to *beauty* than to *peace*:

*‘Glory to God in the highest heaven,  
and on earth peace among those whom he favours!’*

Likewise, among the most remembered of all the prophetic passages that prepare us to hear and receive the birth of Christ is the one that has come to be commonly called “The *Peaceable* Kingdom”:

*The wolf shall live with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,  
the calf and the lion and the fatling together...*

Bumping into one another in the kitchen, which seems to happen in all kitchens no matter the size, we continued to discuss the possibility that what draws people to church is that they looking for *hope*, but then we acknowledged that hope is the focus of Easter – so with Christmas we would need to choose *beauty* or *peace*.

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Whether it is *peace* or *beauty* that draws us to worship is in many ways an academic question, for a strong case can be made for each. But the case I want to make tonight is this:

- Whatever it is to which the birth of Christ *leads*, his birth *arises from and in* the sadness and decay of the world.
- What God does at Christmas is bring something new, something re-born, something recreated from the destructiveness and decay into which God’s creation has fallen.
- In light of this recreation of all that has gone wrong, we who inhabit the earth – even as we mourn its fractures and pray over it all that troubles us about it – are renewed to work for its healing and live toward the redemption his birth promises.

In Christ’s birth, God reaches down into any fracture we are experiencing –

- in personal health
- in family
- in relationships of love and intimacy
- in marriage
- in work
- in the politics of our nation
- and in relations among nations of the world.

In the birth of Christ, God has sowed the seeds of renewal and redemption.

The birth of Christ is thus the “happy beginning” – or the “happy re-beginning” – of our lives *and* our world, and our lives *in* the world. It thus encompasses the *beauty* and peace – and even *hope* – we all seek.

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Earlier this summer, I shared with you that on the afternoon my mother passed away in Memphis over Memorial Day Weekend, after making arrangements at the hospital, I drove around the city and visited old sites from my childhood, basked in the sunshine of the beautiful spring day it was.

One of those sites was the park my brother and I used to walk to – in those days unaccompanied by adults or nannies, the later of whom I was only aware in the person of Mr. French for Buffy, Jody and Cissy on *Family Affair*.

When I drove by the park I noticed that it had one of those brown signs at its entrance with the name of the park, but the name didn’t register with me, for in my family, the park was simply known as the “Been Again Park.” Somehow before the grammar rules took hold in the speech patterns that were forming in our childhood brains, either my brother or I had devised the name of the park as “Been Again.” What we undoubtedly meant was that we were going to the park to which we had been before. “Been Again.”

The birth of Christ brings back into the present elements of the world – indeed elements of God’s creation – which we have experienced before – beauty, peace, hope. “The Been-Again Park.” “The Been-Again Birth of Christ.”

## II.

I see this re-birth and return most subtly in the first line of the beloved Isaiah passage we read earlier. Undoubtedly, it is Isaiah’s vision of “The Peaceable Kingdom” that etches this passage into our memory –

*...the wolf shall lie down with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid...*

But it is actually the opening line of the passage which establishes the *basis* for such a promise of peace. That line reads – in the King James Version of scripture –

*...there shall come forth  
a rod out of the stem of Jesse,  
and a Branch shall grow out of his roots.*

Follow me along here:

- *Jesse* is the father of King David
- David is among the most *revered* rulers in Israel’s history, having established the monarchy and expanded the territory of the people of God, a thousand years before the birth of Christ
- But David is also among the most *flawed* leaders human history has ever seen

- By the time Isaiah wrote, several centuries after David, the kingdom which David had established was plunged into disarray, division, and exile
- Yet Isaiah is bold enough to promise that even from the *stem* of David, decaying in the forest, a rod shall come forth and a branch shall grow
- New life shall emerge from death, decay, destruction.

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When we fast forward to the New Testament, we notice its opening words in the Gospel of Matthew are a genealogy over which our eyes glaze and from which our fingers quickly turn the page.

But listen to introduction of Matthew's genealogy:

*...the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah,  
the son of David, the son of Abraham.<sup>1</sup>*

It is from the timber decaying on the forest floor – the fallen branch of Jesse's son David – that ultimately produces the Messiah, Jesus Christ: *the son of David, the son of Abraham.*

And it is this same Jesus Christ, this Messiah, who will grow up to embody Isaiah's expectation of peace:

*The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.*

Therefore, in Christ's power and under his ultimate rule

*the wolf shall lie down with the lamb,  
the leopard shall lie down with the kid.*

### III.

Speaking of limbs, I want to go out on one now, at least pastorally. Unlike many churches and synagogues of all stripes across the country, our church is doing well. The past six months have brought an uptick in almost every category of measurement –

- Attendance
- Participation
- Financial giving
- Growth.

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<sup>1</sup> Matthew 1:1.

As Pastor, I couldn't be happier.

But some of what is going on in our individual lives is trying and tragic:

- A brother and sister are spending their first Christmas without their mother; and their aunt, who is now their parent, spending her first Christmas without hers.
- Some in the congregation are facing uncertain or even discouraging news from some of the finest doctors and medical facilities in the world
- A seemingly higher number of people in the congregation have lost parents this past year; for several, the last living parent; for some, both parents
- A beloved couple in the church, who have been married over seventy years, lost their daughter earlier this year and each struggle with the fatigue of aging and as they draw ever closer to the valley of the shadow of death.

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A few days ago, I read an article entitled “The New War Against African Christians,” about the threat to Nigerian Christians from a Muslim extremist group. The author, Bernard-Henry Levy, began:

A slow-motion war is under way in Africa's most populous country. It's a massacre of Christians, massive in scale and horrific in brutality. And the world has hardly noticed.

He concludes:

I have the terrible feeling of being carried back to Rwanda in the 1990s, to Darfur and South Sudan in the 2000s. Will the West let history repeat itself in Nigeria?<sup>2</sup>

News of this threat was new to me, and I pride myself – at least some degree – on keeping up with what is going on in the world. But I sometimes feel that the frenzy and division of the political culture in our own country has left us unaware and insensitive to what is going on in other countries. In some ways, we have become like a family so involved in our internal feuds that that we barely notice that the neighbors up the street have now called the police three times on their uncle who lives in the basement and that the widow next door grows lonelier and more isolated by the day. It is a unique form of decay – of dead timber on wet forest floor – we seem to face.

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<sup>2</sup> Bernard-Henry Levy, “The New War Against Africa's Christians,” *The Wall Street Journal* 12/20/2019.

### III.

Into this Davidic line of decay, the birth of Christ comes, and brings with it the *beauty*, the peace, and *yes* the hope we seek.

Like its harbinger in the ancient woods – the shoot from the stem of Jesse – the birth of Christ is connected with so many aspects of life that grow out of dead timber, dead wood, fallen trees that we cannot help but hope that this birth, God is doing something dramatically new.

Think for a minute of all the ways in the past God has used wood – timber – as instruments for renewal.

- Remember God appearing to the elderly and childless Abraham by an *oak tree* with a promise of a son to be born.<sup>3</sup>
- Remember Aaron's *rod* blossoming<sup>4</sup> and his brother Moses' *staff* parting the waters of the Red Sea so that people might escape slavery into freedom.<sup>5</sup>
- Remember that same *staff* turning sweet the bitter waters of Marah so that the newly freed people could have drink in the wilderness that followed.<sup>6</sup>
- Remember God's *rod and staff* comforting David after his failure and fall and remember the words he penned in their honor: "thy *rod and staff* shall comfort me."<sup>7</sup>

And then recall as well the most significant depiction of wood in the Scriptures: The cross of Christ. The Christ born in a wooden manger grew up to be crucified, in the words of Peter:

*"...carry[ing] up our sins  
in his body to the tree,"  
so that "by his wounds,  
[we are] healed."*<sup>8</sup>

A terrific scholar, Frances Young, whom I have re-discovered in the past year, writes eloquently of the way the branch in the woods, the fallen tree, the timber of the cross, are all signs of peace and beauty and hope. She refers to the "generative role of the cross as tree,"<sup>9</sup> the shoot from the stock of Jesse.

As tree of life [she writes]...the cross is the fruition of God's creative intensions, generating new life out of death.

...even in the midst of decay and dissolution,  
[Life] is potentially joyous, creative, full of vitality,  
Beautiful [and] variegated,

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<sup>3</sup> Genesis 18:1-15, especially verses 1 and 10.

<sup>4</sup> Exodus 7:8-13.

<sup>5</sup> Exodus 14:16-18.

<sup>6</sup> Exodus 17:1-7/

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 23.

<sup>8</sup> I Peter 2:24.

<sup>9</sup> Frances M. Young, *Construing the Cross: Type, Sign, Symbol, Word, Action* (Eugene OR: Cascade Books, 2015), 65.

A source of wonder and...transcendence.<sup>10</sup>

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Brian Doyle, who made his living as a writer, passed away in 2017 at the age 60 after a brief illness. Among the final words he penned were these:

We are only here for a minute.  
We're here for a little window.  
And to use that time to catch and share  
Shards of light and laughter and grace  
Seems to me the *great story*.<sup>11</sup>

A seventeenth century hymn proclaims:

Faithful Cross the Saints rely on,  
Noble tree beyond compare!...  
Sweet the timber, sweet the iron,  
Sweet the burden that they bear!<sup>12</sup>

*“A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.”*

Sweet the timber  
Sweet the manger  
Sweet the cross.

Amen.

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<sup>10</sup> Young 72.

<sup>11</sup> Timothy Egan, “There Is Light in this Dark Season,” *The New York Times* 12/20/19.

<sup>12</sup>“Crux fidelis” verse of “Pange Lingua,” by Venantius Fortunatus [d. 609]), available at <https://www.facebook.com/SaintJohnsAbbey/photos/a.620295988014500.1073741829.610984172279015/1128076690569758/?type=3>.