

The Second Sunday of Advent
Revised Common Lectionary, Year A

December 9th, 2007

Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

Redeeming Stumps
The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

One side of my family's yard when I was growing up in South-Central Kansas was dominated by a hedge row – a series of Osage orange trees that were originally planted to break up the wind patterns that would blow away top soil in the Dust Bowl years. They were thorny things, prone to bramble and overgrowth, throwing their sticky, sickly green hedge apples every summer.

During sultry months when the daily storms would drop an inch of rain or more late every afternoon, you could almost sit and watch the lawn grow. Which meant that one day a week, at least, most often I would be out clipping the grass. Navigating the hedgerow was always hazardous. Aside from throwing up hedge apples, the hedge tree stumps hidden in the tall grass were a killer for the blades of the lawn-mower. . .destined to dull them which made cutting the tall grass all the more difficult.

Those stumps! Osage orange stumps, probably still connected with their parent trees at the roots. Left to their own devices, they would grow new suckers and trees so the hedge row would cover the ground. They could not be removed, however notched they were by getting run over by the lawnmower countless times during younger days. The whole hedge would have to be uprooted to get rid of them.

Today's reading from Isaiah, among the most beautiful of the passages we hear during Advent, begins with that curiously mundane word, "stump." The "stump of Jesse." We like to jump ahead to the reference to the "root," but Isaiah opens with the "stump." It almost sounds vulgar amongst the other beautiful images of the poem. But the prophet begins with a "stump," referring first to a people in exile, who have lost their homeland. They have been cut down to the ground and shorn from life itself. They are notched by the great and violent blades of the world, apparently lifeless, restless, and ignored.

Stumps of humanity and community are a ubiquitous part of our shared history. And they remain very much part of our life as Christians.

We need look no further than our own backyards. History was made yesterday when the a diocese of the Episcopal Church, for the first time ever, decided to write itself as a whole out of the authority of the greater Church and re-align with a far-flung bishop. San Joaquin made the big headlines over their decision to break over claims we are no longer a creedal Church and because we have welcomed women in ordained ministry and have begun serious discernment about blessing covenanted, grace-filled relationships that the historical Church has condemned.

It's a classic us-them situation. Whoever gets to claim the "stump" title gets the prize. But cutting trees from their roots is older than the Christian Church itself. The reasons for the late great axes that have been swinging at Anglicanism have their roots back in the first disputes amongst the apostles about who was in or out. Whose interpretation was authoritative or not. Who had the Spirit and who did not.

We must wish out sisters and brothers in San Joaquin who have chosen to depart. . . we must wish them well, for the sake of our God, who sees the arc of human history as a whole and alone knows how deeply our roots and shared branches are intertwined. For in whatever quest they have chosen, wherever their ship will take them, we must recognize that we all belong to the same root of Christ.

But more relevant to my sermon today is the handful of congregations who choose to remain, who suffer the violence of schism but seek to plant anew as Episcopalians in the Central Valley. They are very much a stump, a remnant, the place where Isaiah begins today to sing a poem about hope and redemption.

Back at home we know our own stumps well, even inside ourselves. Those places where we and those we love have been cut down to the ground, chewed up by the blades of life, feeling bereft. It fascinates me that the promise of Isaiah today begins here, not with the fully-grown tree. Indeed, the promise of Christ as spoken through the words of John the Baptist centuries later, is that he will begin with a stump. "The axe is already lying at the root of the trees," John tells those who dare to come and be baptized in the Jordan. There will be stumps to redeem.

And it is with the stumps that Jesus will begin. Stumps in our hearts that we have long neglected as lifeless, that we have carelessly run over with our intellectual and emotional lawn mowers. Stumps forgotten, stubborn, rooted yet with the trees we have paid attention to. Our God is coming to us beginning with the least of these, or more radically, might even create a new stump for Christ to grow from within us again.

It's a slightly unnerving thought, but one that has always brought hope to peoples in exile. It brings hope this morning to our sisters and brothers wondering where they belong. It brings hope to us who remember our imperfect stumps all too often. They are the rootstock of grace, we are told. They are the places where God begins again with the People of the Spirit. They are the source from which all good will come into our lives, no matter how notched and seemingly dead they be.

And that's Good News. Good News for a people yearning to be free of the divisions of the world. Good News for a people seeking our common roots that reach down deep into the soil of Creation, and draw up the living waters so that our branches might multiply and reach abundantly towards our Creator.

Amen.