

The sermon today is drawn from each of our Scripture readings, and we will be focusing on the verses that carry the theme of the root of Jesse, so hear again these words:

[Read Isaiah 11:1, 10; Romans 15:5-12; Matthew 3:1-10]

Each of these passages talks about the root, but as I note in your outline, each passage does something different with the theme: Isaiah *prophesies* about the root, Romans *identifies* the root, and in Matthew, John the Baptist [who is identified as one of the figures that Isaiah was talking about], John delivers a stern *warning* to the root.

Also, each passage talks about the root slightly differently: in Isaiah, the “root” is describing an individual ruler, potentially be anyone from the stump of Jesse, anyone from the kingly line of David. In Romans, Paul particularly identifies *Jesus* as the root, which fits with Isaiah, but makes things specific. In Matthew, the “root” seems to refer to the Jewish people as a whole, and John the Baptist talks about the root of the *trees*. When we pair this reading with Isaiah and Romans, the idea would be “anyone from the kingdom that David ruled over.”

So don’t get confused: the image of the root doesn’t mean exactly the same thing all the time, but these different meanings aren’t *opposed* to each other. They’re looking either *broadly* or *narrowly* at the same idea: David’s kingdom, David’s royal line, David’s true son. That’s the root.

So let’s look at the prophecy: Isaiah says that the stump of Jesse (not a living tree, but a dead stump – Isaiah prophesies of the time when Jesse’s tree has been chopped down and sent into exile because of the sins of David’s descendants. They stopped bearing fruit, and so God chops the tree down. But miraculously, a shoot will spring up from the dead stump! Isaiah gives us a picture of life from death, an image of resurrection, but in the immediate context, it also includes a widespread reversal of evil to good: the branch that grows from Jesse’s root will bring justice out of injustice, peace from hostility, and turn enemies into friends. The fruit produced by the branch from this root is *righteousness* and *reconciliation*.

And by doing this, Isaiah says, when the root of Jesse turns the chaos surrounding the stump into a peaceful kingdom, He will be a *signal* for the peoples that draws the nations to come and inquire. The glory of the root’s kingdom is a signal that brings the nations to come and glorify God. That’s what Isaiah says.

Now look at Romans: Paul is giving an exhortation to harmony and unity (v.5-7), to demonstrate reconciliation and peace, and what does he base it on? Look at verse 8: Christ became a servant to God’s people to show God’s truthfulness (to fulfill prophecy) and to so that the Gentiles (nations) might glorify God for His mercy. This is the fruit that Isaiah had prophesied! Righteousness by faith in God’s promises and prophecies, and reconciliation of Jew and Gentile, resulting in glory to God!

And to make this point, Paul piles up OT references, starting with praise *among* the Gentiles (remember, as a *signal*), moving to praise offered *by* the Gentiles, and closing by quoting Isaiah in v. 12: “the root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles.” Righteousness and reconciliation, resulting in glory to God! *Therefore*, Paul says, live in harmony, so that you may glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ with one voice. Why? Because that’s what Isaiah’s prophesied root came to bring about, and now we know that Isaiah’s root is Jesus! That’s what Paul gets from Isaiah’s image of the root.

Now let’s look to Matthew, who strikes a very different note, an ominous note, talking not just about the *root*, but about the *axe* that threatens the root. Whoa, whoa, whoa! What went wrong between Isaiah’s happy prophecy of life from a dead stump and John’s stern warning that the axe is ready to strike the root of the trees? Now, to be clear, remember the different uses of root: the axe isn’t threatening *Jesus* the root; it’s threatening *Israel the trees* if they don’t repent when the *kingdom* comes through Jesus the root of Jesse, the son of David their king.

And think about this: if we know *anything* about the Pharisees & Sadducees, we know that they *don’t accept Jesus* as the promised root of Jesse, and they *want nothing to do with the Gentiles*. In other words, they don’t have the righteousness that comes by faith, and they’ve got no interest in reconciliation! And yes, John speaks to them even *before* Jesus’ ministry begins, but God knows what’s in their hearts. That’s why He’s warning them, before they miss their opportunity.

When John arrives to announce the kingdom, what Isaiah talked about had come true: Jesse’s tree had been chopped down; there is no king from David’s line. The kingship is in the hands of the Herods, who aren’t properly Jewish at all. The leaders, the Pharisees and Sadducees, aren’t looking for the root of Jesse; they’ve made their peace with a foreign king.

So when John tells everyone to get ready for the coming kingdom, and picks a fight with Herod the false king, the Pharisees and Sadducees don’t lead the people in repenting and getting ready; they *resist* John and Jesus all the way, until by the end of the story they lead Israel in saying “We have no king but Caesar.” They don’t believe the promise of the coming root; they hand the king of the Jews over to be crucified. That’s the kind of behavior that causes God to pick up His axe to chop them down and throw them in the fire.

But it gets worse: instead of believing like righteous Abraham that God would bless all the nations, the Pharisees and Sadducees take sinful pride in the fact that they are Abraham’s children. They use their ancestry to keep themselves *separate* from the nations, rather than being a signal to the nations and welcoming them. Israel’s leaders have given up on God’s promise of a king from David’s line, and they’ve traded Abraham’s faith that God would bless the nations for sinful pride that keeps the nations away. No righteousness, no reconciliation.

And so the story takes a dark turn, and John warns that an axe threatens the root. Since in God's judgment, you are either *fruitful*, or you are *firewood*, John calls them to repent. Isaiah's story of a root sending up shoots of new life is a story of resurrection. The story in Matthew of a root that refuses to bear fruit is a story of death. What makes the difference is what Romans talks about: believing that Jesus Christ is the root of Jesse. *Do you believe?* If you do, then bear fruit in keeping with that faith! Live righteously, and pursue reconciliation, to the glory of God.

Instead of *rejecting* the root, God calls us to *rejoice* in the root. **First**, believe in Jesus as the prophesied root. Paul tells you that he came to prove that God was telling the truth through Isaiah, and when you put your faith in Jesus, God declares that you are righteous. Believe that righteousness come through Jesus Christ, and believe that Jesus is the one who can put the shattered pieces of a broken world back together. That's how the root bears fruit in your life.

Second, righteous people *live righteously*, and God wants that righteousness to show up in our lives when we live at peace even with those people who would naturally be our enemies. Here's what this means: there is no place for ethnic pride (racism) in God's kingdom. There's no place for the battle of the sexes in God's kingdom. There's no place in God's kingdom for the rich to be close to Jesus and the poor to be kept at a distance. There's no place for millennials to dishonor their parents or for older generations to wash their hands of millennials.

I need you to understand that those categories cannot just be "Bible words" to you. The world we live in characterizes the recent election as *warfare* between those two sides, and sees the results of the election as a victory for rich white men over against the poor, minorities, and women. For God's people to be a signal to the nations that Jesus is king, the church needs to be a place where that is *obviously* not true. Here's the challenge: how does our life as a church *signal* to the world that Jesus' kingdom doesn't take sides in those battles, but is a different kind of kingdom, a kingdom where righteousness and reconciliation dwell? Take an honest look at our congregation, take a look at your friendships: is it *obvious* that Christ is reconciling those differences in our midst? Are we a signal that the world is being reconciled here?

If you think that that's a weird message to get you ready for Christmas, be warned: Isaiah promised that that's what the root of Jesse would do; that's the kind of kingdom He would bring. If you don't want that kind of kingdom, if there are certain kinds of reconciliation that you don't don't want to see become evident in our church, then you're on the Pharisees' side, and the axe is laid at the root of your heart.

If, on the other hand, you rejoice to see barriers broken down between classes and sexes and generations and ethnicities, if your friendships and relationships are helping to make a glorious reconciliation more and more visible in our worship, then you are truly rejoicing in the root.

Third thing. We are called to rejoice in *hope*. We don't see that perfect peaceable kingdom yet. Our church doesn't look like the root has born the fruit of righteousness and reconciliation yet. But the God of hope fill us with joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may abound in hope. To rejoice in the root means to abound in hope that the root will produce the fruit of righteousness and reconciliation all over the world.

And **fourth** and finally, we rejoice in the root by glorifying God through joyful praise. Thanks be to God, this is easier to do this time of year than any other, because our Advent and Christmas songs are the richest treasury we have. Even people who don't sing at Christmas! And so I want to encourage you to fill your homes with songs of praise, as Romans 15:9 says. Because the root came and fulfilled God's promises, "therefore I will praise you among the Gentiles, and sing to your name." Rejoice in the root by singing.

Let's help each other with this: when you are listening to God-glorifying Advent and Christmas songs, post them to our Facebook page. Let's clutter that page with songs of praise to encourage one another to rejoice in the root through joyful songs. And then come out in a couple weeks as we fill Rolling Knolls with our Christmas Carols. It's not just a neat activity: it's what people who believe God's promises do: they sing praises to God to glorify the root of Jesse.

So let us believe. Let us reconcile. Let us hope. And let us sing.

- *In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

Let us pray:

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; the root of Jesse who lives and reigns with You and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen.*