

For many people, this is a very stressful time of year. If we start to think of all of the things we have to do between now and the end of the year, the list can easily become overwhelming. In addition to that, Christmas now competes with Christmases of the past, and many people have the feeling that Christmas is just not what it used to be. Is there a way that we can restore the joy of Christmas in our lives?

As I said last week, we cannot control the world around us, but we can control ourselves. That is why we are looking at the promises in the Book of Isaiah over these four weeks of Advent. If we allow these promises to shape our hopes, the noise of our culture may fade into the background a little. We may find ourselves able to focus on something more meaningful at Christmas.

Isaiah had seen a crisis coming for Israel. Because of their arrogance, because of their idolatry, because of their injustice, God said he would allow the Assyrians to conquer them. They would be carried into captivity. The monarchy would be ended.

This would not be a crisis simply because of the defeat by their enemies. It would call into question their very identity as God's chosen people. Their identity was in part formed by the promise of the land. It was the land that was promised to Abraham and his descendants. Assyria would take the people into exile. Could they be Israel apart from the land?

There was also the matter of the end of the monarchy. God had promised that a descendant of David would sit on the throne forever. Could they be God's people if the line of David was cut off?

This crisis also brought into question the faithfulness of God in the face of Israel's sin. Could Israel by breaking their covenant with God negate God's purpose for His people? As humans, we all have a breaking point. There are actions that will end a relationship. Marriages can be broken by the unfaithfulness of one spouse. Even relationships between parents and children can be cut off. Did God have a breaking point? Would Israel's God finally reject His people? If so, what would happen to His promise for the redemption of creation?

In the face of all of these questions about Israel's identity and God's faithfulness, Isaiah saw the vision of a stump. A stump is dead. The life-sustaining leaves have been cut off. Isaiah said that God was going to bring new life from this stump. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.

Remember that Jesse was King David's father. Isaiah said that even the unfaithfulness of God's people would not keep God from being faithful to His promise. Even though it looked like the covenant promises were dead, God would bring new life to David's line. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse."

Have you ever faced a crisis in your identity? Have you even wondered if your unfaithfulness to God has separated you from His promise? Have you ever felt like the purpose your life has been taken away?

Remember the shoot that sprang forth from the stump of Jesse. John the Baptist understood God's faithfulness to His covenant. When the Pharisees were coming out to be baptized, he said, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance."

If the Pharisees, the religious elite, who observed the law very carefully, were not good enough, what hope would there be for the rest of Israel? John the Baptist then said, "God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham."

Even if the Pharisees rejected God's purpose for Israel, God would fulfill His covenant. He would make his promises to Abraham come true. Even if it meant God had to make life spring from rocks. He is the God who brought a shoot from the stump of Jesse.

St. Paul remembered the shoot from the stump of Jesse. When he was writing to Timothy from prison, he kept the faithfulness of God in view. The church in which Timothy was an elder was struggling. There were a number of people who were being unfaithful to the Gospel in various ways. Paul reminded Timothy, "Remember Jesus Christ, risen from the dead, the offspring of David, as preached in my gospel, for which I am suffering, bound with chains as a criminal. But the word of God is not bound! Therefore I endure everything for the sake of the elect, that they also may obtain the salvation that is in Christ Jesus with eternal glory. The saying is trustworthy, for: If we have died with him, we will also live with him; if we endure, we will also reign with him; if we deny him, he also will deny us; if we are faithless, he remains faithful—for he cannot deny himself."

If we are faithless, he remains faithful – for he cannot deny himself. That is part of what we celebrate at Christmas. We celebrate the shoot from the stump of Jesse. When Jesus was born, Israel was again in crisis. Herod was king of Israel, but he was not from the line of King David. Matthew begins his Gospel with the genealogy of Joseph, the stepfather of Jesus. Right in the middle of Joseph's lineage was King David. Jesus, who was born to Mary, Joseph's wife, was the shoot from the stump of Jesse, and he is called the Messiah. The promise survived because God is faithful to His promises. New life springs up where all we could see was death, because God is faithful.

As we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world, it might be helpful to take some time to ask ourselves where we need new life to spring up. I know that more than a few people here have been praying for their children to return to the Christian faith. Do not be discouraged. If God could raise up a Messiah from the line of David, He is able to answer those prayers. Perhaps you once had a dream for a ministry, but somehow that dream got cut down. God can raise it up again. It may not look like what you thought it would look like, but God can bring new life from a stump. It might be a relationship that has been tepid at best. Keep praying. Keep hoping. God can bring new life.

As we approach Christmas, put your hope in the one who brings new life into the world. Don't allow the busyness around this time of year drown out the promise we have from the Prophet Isaiah. The one who brought forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse is still active in this world.

He is still bringing new life where all we could see was death. That is the promise we celebrate at Christmas.