

“The Bush That Would Not Die”
Isaiah 11:1-10

Sermon Series: The Big Reveal Week 2. The Root of Jesse
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The Woodside Church

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“You killed it.” That’s what she said. Where once stood a massive bush, two to three times my daughter’s height, now there was just a stump. “Why did you do it?” Kristin demanded. Being only ten at the time, she didn’t understand the complicated science of landscaping. “It was out of control,” I replied defensively. I’ve wrestled with this forsythia for years. Every time I trimmed it, the blooming thing came back bigger. I hacked and slashed like a desperate safari hunter in a bad Tarzan movie. But it was all to no avail. Within a few weeks, it was more monstrous than ever. All this leads me to believe that “*forsythia*” in Latin must mean *demon weed*.

Well I’d had enough. That day I cut off its leaves, twigs, branches and limbs until all that was left was a gnarly old stump. It made Charlie Brown’s Christmas Tree look like the one in Rockefeller Center. Kristin caught me in the act, leafy branches still piled high around my feet. “Why did you kill it?” she cried. “You can’t kill these things,” I replied, “They always come back.” And sure enough, next Spring, that gnarled stump, that bush that would not die, sent out branches and sprouted leaves. Round One was over: Bush 1, Doug 0.

Up until my foray with the forsythia, I never quite understood what Isaiah means when he says, “A shoot will come from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit” (Isaiah 11:1). In my ignorance I thought when you cut something down to the stump, it doesn’t come back. But Isaiah must be a gardener. He knows there are some bushes that never die. No matter how much you hack, slash, slice, and sever, its roots still send up shoots and, eventually, fruits.

That’s not always good news. Just when you think you have something beat, just when you finally deal it a death blow, it rears its head once more.

- No more snacking, no more bingeing. You’re going to exercise and eat right. Then the holidays hit and it’s all over.
- You pour out the bottles, throw away the cigarettes or get rid of the drug stash. You resolve to never let them control your life again. But then the old itch comes back, the overwhelming craving hits and you go out again to find your “friend.”
- You thought it was over when the judge banged the gavel. Your ex is finally out of your life. And yet the fight still goes on: custody disputes, missing support checks, harassment whenever you drop off the kids.
- You were so relieved when the treatments were done and the doctors said it was in remission. But now you realize remission doesn’t mean it’s gone.
- It’s been years, you’ve worked through the sadness and the grief. But this time of year always brings back a fresh wave of memories ... and pain.

You cut the bush down to a stump. Why won't it die?

Or perhaps you planted, watered, and lovingly tended the bush only to have someone else hack it to pieces. A lady writes, "One year for Mother's Day my husband decided to give me roses. Not from a florist mind you. He cut down almost my whole rose bush from the side of our home and put them in a vase. I learned a lesson that day. I will never complain again that he doesn't bring me flowers!"

Has someone cut down something precious to you? Your achievements. Your hopes and dreams. Has someone stolen a boyfriend, girlfriend or a loved one from you? Did bad decisions steal away your assets and retirement? Have you put your heart and soul, your time and energy into your work only to be cast aside? Has someone cheated you, taken advantage of you, betrayed your confidence and trust? You nurtured the plant, patiently watered and fed the bush. It took years of dedication. It required your whole being. Then, with one swift slice, it all comes tumbling down.

The Prophet Isaiah and his people know what it means to be cut down. Through the years, the tiny country of Judah is overrun by countless hordes of soldiers. Philistines, Egyptians, Syrians, Assyrians: wave upon wave they come. One replaces another leaving carnage, smoldering ruins and death behind. But through it all, God's people can count on one thing: for over four hundred years, a descendent of King David, the son of Jesse, always sits on the throne in Jerusalem. A few kings were good, most were bad, some were wicked. But regardless of their records, this unbroken line of twenty kings, this dynasty from David, holds the nation together through every onslaught. God promises there will always be a son of David to sit on the throne (see II Samuel 7). Like a towering monument, these kings, descended from David and his father Jesse, are a sign that the Lord will protect them. Like a mighty, solid oak, the family tree of David is a living symbol that God is with them.

Then in 587 BC the Babylonians strike and the tree of David is cut down. The last king, Zedekiah, tries to escape in the night from Jerusalem as enemy soldiers pour through a break in the walls. He is captured and brought before Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. Zedekiah's sons are slaughtered before him. It is the last sight he will ever see. For then the Babylonians put his eyes out. Zedekiah, the last of David's dynasty, is sent in shackles back to Babylon where he dies in a dungeon. More than a century earlier, Isaiah predicts this will happen. The family tree of David will be felled leaving only the stump of David's father Jesse.

What follows is the second clue in our series The Big Reveal. Isaiah says up from the roots of that stump a new branch will sprout.

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit. The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding, the Spirit of counsel and of might, the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—and he will delight in the fear of the Lord. He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes, or decide by what he hears with his ears; but with righteousness he will judge the needy, with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth. (Isaiah 11:1-4)

A new beginning, a new King, a new David will arise. Though He is from David's family, this new Monarch will far surpass them all. God's own Spirit will be in Him. He will govern the nation with God's wisdom. He will wage war with God's power. He will

decide cases with God's impartial justice. And He will honor, revere and worship the Lord above all else. He will lift up the poor and knock down the wicked. This new branch from the stump of Jesse will rise up like a glorious flag and everyone will rally to Him. From the four corners of the earth they will run to Him: the scattered people of Judah, the exiles of Israel, and all nations.

This new King will bring a glorious age of peace. The wolf and the lamb will become neighbors. The leopard will take a nap with the goat. The fatted calf, the strong ox and the majestic lion will all eat straw for breakfast. The cow and the bear will feed from the same trough while their little ones wrestle playfully on the ground. And a little child, the most defenseless one of all, shall be their shepherd and guide. This new King will banish fear and bring glorious rest to a weary, war-torn world.

"They will neither harm nor destroy on all my holy mountain," says the Lord.

"For the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea" (Isaiah 11:9).

So the Jews wait for their Messiah, their new King David. And wait. And wait. The Persians have a great king named Cyrus. All the nations rally to him. The Greeks have a great king named Alexander. All the nations rally to him. The Romans have Caesar Augustus. All the nations rally to him. But no great warrior, no mighty king rises to make Israel a vast empire.

Then comes Jesus. He is from David and Jesse's family tree. The Spirit of God rests on Him. The wisdom of God, the understanding of God, the counsel of God, the power of God and the righteousness of God flow through Him. His words knock down the powerful and lift up the poor. A movement gathers around Him. The masses expect Him to rise up and conquer Jerusalem, the first of many victories. Then, as Isaiah promises, the Israelites will gather around Him, the nations would rally to Him. Israel will push back the Romans and become an empire and eternal peace will blanket the world as the waters cover the sea.

But it doesn't happen that way. Jesus never lifts a sword. He never gives a command in battle. He never conquers a single acre of land. He doesn't even resist arrest on the night He is betrayed and abandoned by his friends. The long awaited Messiah, the Son of David and Jesse, is nailed to a tree. And when He is dead, they cut Him down. Everyone concludes He is not the one. The prophecy does not apply to Him.

And then comes the Biggest Reveal – the one no one expects: out of the ground, beside the stump of the Cross, there rises a new Branch. Jesus rises from the dead because He is the One who will not die, the One who will not stay dead. He does not come to build an empire for empires fade away. He does not come to run a government for governments fall from power. He does not come to start a religion for religions fight holy wars. He does not come to teach a new philosophy for philosophies go out of fashion. He comes to change the one thing that lasts for eternity – the human spirit – your spirit. The late George Harrison said, "You can be the king of a country or a fabulous Beatle and it doesn't matter. What matters is what's on the inside." What's inside you?

Is your spirit wounded by abuse? Let Him heal you.

Is your spirit imprisoned by an addiction? Let Him free you.

Is your spirit crushed by heavy burdens? Let Him release you.

Is your spirit broken by rejection? Let Him put you back together.

Is your spirit grief stricken by a loss? Let Him comfort you.

Is your spirit hungry for love? Let Him fill you.

His Branch will rise up and bear fruit inside you even if your spirit has been cut right down to the stump.

But I must warn you friends, as Jesus grows inside you, He will have to cut and prune away some of the weeds that are choking your spirit. If there is selfishness, if you demand to do things your way, He will snip it off. If your ego gets in the way, He will cut it out of the way. If you go around feeling sorry for yourself, He will nip that in the bud. If you carry a lot of resentments and grudges, He will lop them off. If you keep reaching for forbidden fruit, He will put it out of your reach. Why? Because He knows it's not good for you. Until He clears all that away, there is no room for Him to grow in your soul. Jesus brings peace to this world. But He brings it one heart at a time.

Will you pass on His peace this Christmas? Will you give it away? You pass it on when you share a Christmas Eve invitation to Woodside with someone, when you fill 4,000 hygiene kits and wrap 1000 utensils, when you participate with Code Blue on this cold winter nights and serve a meal with the dinner ministry, when you give a gift through the angel tree, when you become a tutor with Urban Promise, when you make a pledge and give to God's work through Woodside. Pass on His peace this Christmas. And as His peace shoots up in more and more human hearts, a branch of peace will rise up from even the most unexpected stumps.

One of the challenged, struggling neighborhoods of the city is Frankford. In the center of Frankford is St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Its massive stone tower is about the only thing which looms larger than the Frankford L which runs right in front of the church. It's one of those gorgeous gothic European-style cathedrals built back in the 19th century. Today it appears to be a vacant stump. Row upon row of pews, enough to seat a thousand, all empty. While outside this stone fortress there is a community afflicted with addiction, up to its neck in crime, desperate for a message of hope and peace.

Frankford is a place many dare not visit at night. Yet last Friday night that's just what Scott and Michelle Burgess and their team from Woodside did. With the cooperation of Pastor John of St. Mark's and Recovery leader Billy Donnelly, they offered the seventh Recovery Café. The people came pouring in. There was worship and praise. Scott gave a powerful message that Christmas is not about presents or tree as good as those are. It's about a Child who surrendered the glories of heaven and descended into our darkness, a Child born to die so we can live, a Child who rises up and gives us hope, freedom and peace when we feel like burned out, cut down, charred stumps. After Scott passed on that message of peace, people gave their lives to Christ and came forward for prayer, healing and deliverance. And then Michelle and her team served a delicious, full course meal to a long line of God's children.

Christmas came early. No. Heaven came early – it was a taste of the heavenly banquet we will one day enjoy when there will be no more drugs, no more division, no more disease and no more death...all because of a tiny branch from David's line born in Bethlehem. No matter how deep the descent into hell, our God can still rise from the dead. He is the God who will not die. Let that little branch grow up in you.