

Problem: What can come out of an old, crusty, stump?

-There are 4 trees in the front yard of our new house that we had removed on the recommendation of our tree trimmer. They are called Japanese Elm and apparently are considered an invasive species in Montana. Our trimmer sawed the trunks of the trees down to the ground and recommended putting plastic bags over the stumps. "They'll start shooting up again in no time if you don't do something," she explained. Now I don't know if it's me being a cocky new homeowner or the fact that I was lazy, but either way, I thought that putting bags over the stumps at first was really overkill. They were these crusty old, weathered stumps. How could they possibly regrow?

-Surprise, surprise: I'm mowing the yard the last time for the season and sure enough when I get to the spot where the stumps are there are these big saplings that are coming out of the stump! I decide to go over these things with the lawn mower and it seems like they knew I was going to do this because these sapling shoots seemed to be made of extra hard "mower proof" wood. As I went over them with the lawn mower there was this crazy chewing sound, then shaking of the lawn mower, then a discovery of the lawn mower blade sitting next to what seemed to be fully alive sapling shoots (yes, they caused the lawn mower blade to come off which I had to reattach).

-Needless to say, I have a plastic bag now covering these 4 stumps weighed down by dirt and other rocks for the winter. Turns out the tree trimmer was right: life can come out of these weird, crusty looking stumps after all.

-How many of you have a similar story trying to deal with invasive trees or plants that just won't die? I'm sure some of them are pretty entertaining.

-In many ways, this is how the nation of Israel, who has been defeated and taken to live in Babylon is feeling about this text in Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Really? By the time this text was written, the royal line of Jesse was like that crusty old stump sitting in your yard. It had been seemingly dead and gone for generations. A shoot is going to come out of that crusty old thing? Yeah right.

Solution: With God's spirit, even an old crusty stump can turn into something new.

-This Advent season I am sensing a great deal of weight that is being carried around by a lot of people. I sense it even in myself, too. People are tired and weary. People are stressed and worried. There are probably many things that are leading to this: maybe it's the state and divisiveness of our election, maybe it's the seemingly insurmountable challenges our communities and world faces, maybe it's because of personal and family struggles, or maybe it's simply because it's getting darker earlier and earlier. Either way, maybe to some extent, you feel a little like those ancient Israelites who are tired and facing a pretty dark and intense world.

-Due to some miscommunication and scheduling issues (mostly on my part), I went out for a happy hour beer this last week with two friends of our congregation two separate days in a row only to find myself getting the wrong day or alone from a last minute cancelation. So two nights in a row this last week, your pastor was sitting in a brewery drinking a beer by himself (this is a great image isn't it?) Well, it turns the second night I got into a brief conversation with another person who I knew loosely. They asked me: "so what do you do again?" to which I replied I am a pastor. You could tell this person had never really had any connection to any faith community because after sitting in some awkward silence she then replied: "Well, I guess you can keep praying for our world at least." She said this in a way that I could tell her understanding of what a pastor (and the church in general) does basically is pray and that's about it." This understanding, as misinformed as I believe it is, is held among many people particularly in my generation who are not as connected with a faith community. In this young woman's eyes, I as pastor and the church are the crusty stump. We might pray once in awhile but beyond that, there isn't really any life left in this craggly, out of date, stump. -What energy is still left in this crusty old stump anyways?

-“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.” Everything gets turned on it's head when the Spirit of God comes to town. When the ruach (breath of God) blows over this stump, not even a lawn mower or a plastic trash bag can hold back it's shoots.

Implication: Our hope rests in a new order of things that we cannot see right now.

-“Life finds a way” (Jeff Goldbloom from *Jurassic Park*)

-Today is a very special day as we baptize Luca. In talking with Rebecca this week about why the church does baptism anyways, we got talking about commitments. Baptism is about the real commitments that several entities make to one another: commitment of Luca's sponsors, of his parents (Rebecca and Arik), and of us as the church community. Baptism is about celebrating Luca who is and always will be a child of God, but it's also about committing to each other that together we all have a role to helping this new baby gain an understanding of who and how Christ works in this world. It's in these commitments to each other where the Holy Spirit blows and “life does find a way.” It's in relationship with each other where all of sudden we'll find a new shoot popping out of this old stump.

-Because what does relationship do? It breaks down impossibilities. Who would have think this this 14 year old girl out in the middle of the countryside would give birth to a Savior of the world and be a rock for his ministry? Who would have think that this guy and a ragtag group of 12 fisherman could proclaim God's love in such a radical way that they change the world? That's what God is all about. Who knows what Luca has in his

future, but through his baptism in Jesus Christ and through our commitments to one another, I know there is a going to be a shoot coming out of this stump.

-May we together in Christ find today find new life in ourselves, in our church, and in our world. Amen.