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# Stumped

Isaiah 11:1-10

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on December 8, 2013 by the Rev. Dr. Luke A. Powery

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We have recently celebrated the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Abraham Lincoln's "Gettysburg Address." It's known as his signature speech on the national ideals of liberty and human equality and it's only 2 minutes long. 2 minutes long and we're still talking about it 150 years later. Maybe every sermon should only be 2 minutes long. As someone wisely noted to me—no one has ever complained of a sermon or speech being too short. President Lincoln understood that brevity did not undercut quality. In fact, in his day, he was known as an oratorical master of stump speeches.

The idea of a so-called stump speech dates back to 19<sup>th</sup> century American politics. Politicians would go from region to region, stumping, highlighting what they planned to do while in office, emphasizing their thoughts about America, stressing key words and phrases to be memorized, and over time, they would basically give the same speech in different areas. It was as if they had one good sermon and they wanted to get the most out of it. The term "stumping" came from the practice of politicians using a tree stump or an actual sawed off portion of a log to stand on so that the audience could see them more visibly. *A Dictionary of Americanisms*, published in 1848, noted that some stump speeches were delivered from a "table, a chair, a whiskey barrel," or even on horseback. Today one may view this chapel pulpit as an ecclesial stump where we, preachers, stump for Jesus every week. A sanctified stump for salvation. Lincoln stumped and he revealed that you can't underestimate a stump speech because something so small, so short, even brief (2 minutes that will still be inspiring the nation at 200 years), can have a huge life-giving impact. One word. One phrase. One idea. One stump can make a world of a difference.

But stumps don't usually make the front page of the New York Times unless they're stump speeches like the so-called "I have a Dream" Iowa speech given by the 2004 Democratic candidate for President, Howard Dean. That speech didn't help him though it made the news. Most of the time, however, stumps, tree stumps, don't make headline news. Stumps reveal that a tree has been cut down but what is forgotten many times is that its roots remain. Stumps may be viewed as leftover stubs from a once great past. A lingering remnant from a previous heyday. A memorial to a fascinating history. A sacrament of the old, something that was once alive but is perhaps near death though still present. The memory lives on through the physical stump. An ecological reminder that the past is still present though not in its grand form. The past is not out of sight; it's still holding on in this world though it does not have the same effect. It lingers on, holding on to life, perhaps refusing to die out. Maybe because it's a sign that life is not over but life is actually just beginning. A sign that there is a future. But many times, we just walk or drive by stumps in the woods because it appears that their life is over. The best of what they had to offer the world has come and gone.

The glory of the nation of Israel appeared to be over. Christopher Seitz comments about the historical-political context of today's lectionary passage, and writes, "The Davidic kingdom is nothing but a stump." The stump of Jesse. Not a stump speech but the remnant of a tree, of a people, who basically have been devastated. The prophet Isaiah uses agricultural imagery to depict how Israel, the vineyard, will be made a waste and devoured (Isaiah 5). We learn of the deforestation of Israel (Isaiah 9:8-10:4). The "briers and thorns" (Isaiah 5) that pervade a people and illuminate their decaying condition and position in the world. How the mighty fall. How the majestic trees are cut down leaving a mess (Isaiah 10:20-27b), leaving only a remnant, a stump of a once great nation. The stump may be a sign of a fallen monarchy and a kingdom reduced to size, an insignificant size or portion, nothing to pay attention to really. Just a stump, believing that the best days were over rather than the best was yet to come. No one creates a Facebook page for a stump. No one wants to broadcast when they feel like a stump or are stumped.

But the truth is that many may feel stumped in life at times, cut off or cut down to size without the promise of ever blooming flowers again. A once terrific and glamorous life seems to have turned horrific or at least become more humble in scale. And to be stumped was never a nightly prayer request; it seems to have just happened. To be stumped. So stumped you rather be stuck in bed all day with the curtains closed. Torn apart perhaps from your

former self or community such that it seems as if the best days are in the past and there's no way up or out or in. At a standstill, stagnant, stymied, stuck, stumped.

That seems to be where we are with violence or the rumor of violence in this country. Stuck in a cycle. A recent shooting on NCCU's campus. A bomb threat hoax at a NC State library. Yale University's campus shutdown because of a supposed gunman, only to learn it was also a hoax. A new fad called the "knockout game" in which youth randomly punch people trying to knock them out. Teenagers dying in police custody. Insane, inhumane fights over Black Friday sales. We're stumped regarding violence in this nation. We continue to be torn apart by it in Durham and beyond. We're stymied because we're not sure what to do or where to go.

And violence may not be directed at another but at oneself, indicating that our stumped feeling has become worse, even deadly. What do you do when just a couple of weeks ago a young pastor in Macon, Georgia commits suicide at his home while his wife and kids along with his congregation wait for him to arrive at the church to preach? In 3 weeks, there have been at least 3 pastor suicides. Pastors looking for peace will even pull the trigger. A Virginia senator's son stabs his father and then commits suicide. We've entered Advent but the coming of Christmas is not joyful for everyone; it can be a season of deep depression because this season converges with the death of loved one. Many are stumped and really don't know what to do or where to go. It can be a "dark night of the soul" (Saint John of the Cross) or just a living hell. Can't find the answers you want or need, can't figure it out, seemingly blocked from revelation, cut off from any hope of a bright future, asphyxiated by life. In other words, stumped, not by a math equation or word problem, but by life.

What do you do when you are stumped? To whom or what do you turn? Alcohol, drugs, sex, food, a relationship, the Internet, *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books? Do you call on the Holy Spirit? My Pentecostal roots may show now with this turn to the Spirit because Spirit talk in many sectors of the church is MIA, missing in action. Some congregations have become "Spirit-shy" and don't like to speak about the Holy Spirit. I understand this to a certain extent because what can we say about the wind, the breath of God? What can we say about a spirit, a wind that blows where it wills but you don't know from where it comes or where it goes? But our lack of "Spirit speech" doesn't mean the Spirit is not working nor does our abundance of chatter about the Spirit mean we possess the Spirit. To play off the words of a Spiritual, "everybody talking about the Spirit ain't got the spirit."

But prophet Isaiah is not afraid to talk about the Spirit and reveals the fruit of the Spirit through a stump. A stump may not be a sign that life is over; it may be a sign that life is just beginning. Elsewhere, Isaiah proclaims that a stump is a "holy seed" (Isaiah 6:13). The stump, though cut off at the top, still has its roots in the soil at its bottom. That the stump of Jesse remains standing reveals that God is not finished with Israel nor has God given up on them. The stump still has roots and as a seed it will blossom well beyond its initial size just like the kingdom of God is like a mustard seed (Mark 4:30-32). Stumps, though not popular, remind us that God is not finished with us yet. They're still a part of God's creation. What it looked like at full bloom in the past will change because God will renew it, revive it, refashion it like a potter with clay but it will flourish again. It may not be what it used to be but it will be what God desires it to be. The stump may be a remnant but that may be exactly where your redemption is to be found. Don't despise a stump. Don't despise being stumped, no matter how difficult, because your salvation may actually come through the struggle of 'stumped-ness.'

Psychologists teach that if one is stumped by a problem, one should "seek the obscure" (Tony McCaffrey) because one gets stuck by fixating on the common uses of an object but it is the discovery of the obscure that leads to innovative inventions and solutions to problems. In one case, people living in Filipino shanties were using electric lights inside while it was sunny outside. To save money someone took a 2-liter Coke bottle, stuck it through a hole in the roof, and filled it with water. The water then reflected the light around the inside of the house. This idea used an overlooked feature of water, that is, that "[water] refracts light 360 degrees" (McCaffrey). Water may mean more than just a drink.

A stump may mean more than just being stuck. When one sees a stump that may be all one sees. But there's more to a stump than being stumped. This is because as Isaiah reveals through his repetition, that the stump is not alone but in great company. The Spirit is present. "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." The Spirit. And the mention of the Spirit should clue us into something. Throughout the biblical witness, the Spirit is the presence and power of God and many times when the Spirit is mentioned she's linked with giving life. Whether hovering over the

waters of creation in Genesis or empowering the speech of the Hebrew prophets or initiating the birth of Jesus or sparking the resurrection of Jesus or bringing the future of God into the present, the Spirit ushers in new life. As the apostle Paul writes in Romans, the Spirit is life. This is indisputable and irrefutable in scripture. God the Spirit of life is in our midst even when we might be stumped.

Jesse was the father of David (1 Sam 16) and the spirit of the Lord anointed David thus by speaking of the “stump of Jesse,” prophet Isaiah implies the same spirit of the Lord will rest on this new king, the one Israel had been waiting for. When the Spirit of the Lord rests on someone, something happens. Tongues of Pentecostal fire can explode to create the church of Acts. Jesus becomes the Christ through the anointing of the Spirit and when the Spirit is on him, he brings good news to the poor, proclaims release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and lets the oppressed go free (Luke 4). When the Spirit rests on someone, even from the heritage of a stump, something happens, because the Spirit will not be stumped.

Being stumped does not stop God’s work nor does it mean that God has given up on us. The promise of Advent tells us otherwise. It says that God never gives up on us, always comes to us, even when we’ve been stumped and stuck for a long time. “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” Through a Christocentric reading, Jesus is that shoot, the promised king to come in the power of the Spirit to redeem all of creation. And what power it is.

Power to redeem a stump so that it will flourish again and bear fruit. Power to create something big out of something small. A shoot from the seed of a stump will be the hope of a new creation sparked by the Spirit. A flourishing future stems from a stump whose roots are watered in the baptism of the Spirit. This is what the Spirit does through a stump—establish a new creation, a world of justice, righteousness, faithfulness, reconciliation, peace, security, harmony, rest, playful joy, innocent abandonment, vulnerability, and mutual trust, a world we sorely desire. A world with the scriptural motto “They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain.” It is the reconciliation of all things. The Spirit builds an organic community of creation in which natural predators now coexist with their prey. Those who once devoured each other now desire to live together in harmony on holy ground, rather than hunker down with stand your ground. Wolves live with lambs. Leopards lie down with the kid. The calf and lion and fatling together and a little child shall lead them. The cow and bear graze and their young are preschool playmates. The lion eats like the ox and an innocent child rests by vipers. Yet there will be no hurt in this world, God’s world. We will not destroy one another but delight in each other. This is the Spirit’s world.

This is the promise of Advent. A resting place where we’ll study war no more and commune with each other as God’s creation. It’s a vision of an alternative kingdom that has international reach (v.10), ecological influence, and ethical import. In other words, it is literally world-changing and a new creation all together. A kingdom in which we put our guard down by the grace of God and become what we always hoped to be, even if we’ve been stumped. Being stumped does not mean we have to be stuck forever. In the Spirit of Advent, the promise is that we won’t be because of a little baby shoot from the stump of Jesse. Advent proclaims that Jesus is the shoot, a royal branch that grows into a cruciform tree bearing fruit for us because Jesus, in the power of the Spirit, is always stumping on our behalf, even if it costs him his life. Advent reveals that there is one who has come and is coming to restore and renew all things so that we might be freed to be who God has made us to be—one people, one creation, one beloved community, a real fellowship of the Holy Spirit. The promise of Advent can ignite in us a “passion for what is possible” (J Blenkinsopp) with God.

What is possible is that the stump itself is not our future. The future may stem from the stump but our future will not be stumped. “...the roots are silently at work in the darkness of the earth against a time when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit. Such is the growing edge!” (Howard Thurman) “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The promise of Advent is that the stump does not represent that the best days have come and gone but that the best days, your best days, are still yet to come. One stump can make a world of a difference. One shoot can save. So the next time you see a stump, take a good look at it, because you may be looking at your salvation. “Not by might nor by power but my Spirit,” says the Lord. This is my stump speech/sermon and I’m sticking with it.