

My rectory office is graced with a fireplace, as is my sitting room upstairs. Neither has been used since my arrival—my skill set is woefully lacking. A rainy camp out with the Boy Scouts at age 10 confirmed my preference for a bed over a sleeping bag! When asked recently to start a fire at my brother’s cabin in northern Wisconsin, I was starting from scratch. Thinking the lighter logs would burn more easily, I quickly learned in fact that the heavier hardwood burned more slowly, (fewer trips outside!) produced more heat and less smoke. One is never too old to learn!

I was amazed at how much wood had been culled from the forested area of his property. Branches fall routinely and need to be cleared, providing ample supply of firewood. In a sense, today’s readings even bear this out. Both in Isaiah’s prophecy and in our Gospel, the Holy Spirit paints a picture of the need to prune the forest. Israel was once like a thriving forest, but when the people neglected God, they stopped producing fruit.

Isaiah depicts Israel as a lifeless, petrified forest; only the stumps and roots remained. This scriptural image may be lifted from the cultivation of old olive trees, which “cease producing fruit from the main trunk, instead sprouting fruit-bearing shoots from the base of the stump, which grow up around the fruitless central trunk.”<sup>1</sup> Isaiah’s prophecy made clear—the ruthless nation from the North was to be God’s hand of judgment on rebellious Israel.

With one sweep of the forester’s ax, Assyria wrested Israel from their land, revealing the moral bankruptcy of the monarchy. Israel traded the prosperity of the Lord’s way for the poverty of idolatry. But Isaiah’s prophecy left room for a new beginning springing from the very origin from which the Davidic dynasty arose.<sup>2</sup> The forest would blossom again. “A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse.” Today’s prophecy serves as both a challenge and a reminder that a stump is not dead, and though

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. Mark Giszczak, “Advent’s Fierce Peace” in Catholic Exchange.

<sup>2</sup> Cf. New American Bible footnote on Isaiah 11:1

not visible above ground, a root reveals new life just below the surface. While it appears that the Church is at times a counterbalance to contemporary society, our message remains timeless. Culture changes, sometimes quite rapidly, yet the fundamentals of our faith endure.

We ought neither think that the faith is dying, nor lose hope with loved ones who may be struggling or even society in general. Giving up is not an option; selling the grace of God short will surely backfire. Advent provides precious time to live in hopeful expectation, spreading the joy of the Gospel to all who will listen. One way we do that is by exercising the Gifts of the Holy Spirit enumerated in today's passage and received at Confirmation. Through them, our hope is kept alive.

Though the church appears little more than a lifeless stump to some, she remains a prophetic voice in the world. Consider Isaiah's vision of peace. We dare to dream, praying for a just peace for all those suffering in the war in Ukraine. Both by his lifestyle and his message, John the Baptist challenged people to look deeper into their hearts, to change their ways.

Winter is here—we are settling in for the duration. But before you know it, in early April, the tiniest shoots, the buds, will begin to blossom. We will wait and hope and the Lord will not delay. I close with the opening strophe of a hymn attributed to the 8<sup>th</sup> century English St. Bede, who has left us a poignant hymn about John the Baptist. He recognized his central role in salvation history as the Herald of our coming salvation. It begins:

*The great forerunner of the morn,  
The herald of the Word, is born;  
And faithful hearts shall never fail  
With thanks and praise his light to hail.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Venerable Bede (d. May 26, 735) was an English monk at Northumbrian monastery at Monkwearmouth and was buried in Durham Cathedral. The hymn is entitled *Praecursor altus luminous*.