

“The Root of David”

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They say the church is an endangered species. Don't you ever believe it.

Isaiah 11:1-10; Revelation 5:1-14

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Pando at risk

You may have seen on the news lately that what is described as “the largest single living organism” in the world, a 100+acre grove of [aspen trees](#) in Forest Lake National Park, Utah, is in danger of dying. The reason these 40,000 trees are considered a single organism is that – unlike most trees – the aspens all shoots from a single root system. It even has a name, Pando, Latin for “I spread.”

Pando is threatened because insects and game animals are eating the baby shoots. It is a community of senior citizen trees. It's majestic, but it's no longer reproducing. Unless something changes, Pando is certain to die.

There are those who are similarly concerned about the Church. Another word from the same root – pandemic – has created concern that churches will never return to their previous vitality, that the Church is an endangered species. Don't believe it.

The Advent season at Corinth is connecting the dots from King David to Jesus. Today Jesus is “the Root of David.”

Heaven on earth – Isaiah 11

The first half of Isaiah is mostly a message of judgment and gloom. Isaiah 6 ends with this graphic prophecy: “The holy seed will be the stump in the land.” It's not possible to overstate the importance of this judgment in the story of the Bible. God had

promised to Abraham, Moses, Joshua, David, and Solomon that he would create a nation in this land and preserve it forever. Now it's going to be nothing but a stump.

But with God, the end is never the end. "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse," Isaiah 11 begins, "from his roots a branch will bear fruit" (1). Jesse was King David's father. Something new will emerge from the miserable wreckage of the broken covenant between God and Israel that had reached its culmination during David's reign.

This "shoot" is a Person, based on the pronouns in verse 2. "The Spirit of the LORD will rest on him – the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding." "Spirit" is the Hebrew word for breath or wind – *ruach*. Across both Old and New Testament is this idea of the invisible work of a personal God. This "shoot from Jesse" will be driven by the imperceptible but undeniable work of God producing unparalleled and unprecedented wisdom, power, and knowledge. We know him as Jesus.

The rest of this description is about what this Branch of Jesse's tree will accomplish *on earth*. The vision of Isaiah is that this world will be made right.

We're always complaining about the wicked getting away with evil. We instinctively are wired for a world that is made right. Fairness wins. Justice is never perverted. Rulers are consistent models of wisdom and faithfulness.

The whole world will be righted. It will be filled with the knowledge of God instead with pain, uncertainty, storm, and calamity. Can we live without fear or danger? Can we have a world where cancer and heart disease and stroke and pandemic no longer terrorize us? Can we live in peace among nations and in our families? Yes, Isaiah says. All creation will rest under this Spirit-led, Spirit-empowered Root of Jesse.

Earth in heaven

Isaiah 11 is about this world, but Revelation 5 is a vision of heaven. We have leaped over seven hundred years from the time of Isaiah to Jesus' birth, and almost another century by the time John sees his visions of the end on Patmos Island. From John until our day, there's another twenty centuries – and we don't know how much longer until the end of the age.

Much has changed since Isaiah wrote. Empires have risen and fallen – Babylon, Persia, Greece, and now Rome. What hasn't changed is that the earth has not yet experienced what Isaiah prophesied. If anything, Rome has made it worse. Their domination is more complete and more widespread. No one in John's time could imagine how the power of Rome could ever be toppled.

The promised Messiah has come, but it doesn't seem like he made any difference. The followers of Jesus have spread out and created small communities of believers, but the first generation of leaders have all died except John, including Peter

and Paul who died two or three decades earlier – violently at the hand of crazed Nero. Now Domitian rules the Roman Empire. He insists on being addressed as “Lord and God” and has initiated the first empire-wide persecution of Christians. The churches themselves have fallen into idolatry and conflict – or worse, half-heartedness.

What’s going on in heaven with all that turmoil on earth? A portal opens for John to see. In chapter 4 he sees God on the throne, surrounded by four living creatures (the highest order of angels) and 24 elders (meaning both Israel’s tribes and the 12 apostles). God is always on the throne. John is told he will see a vision of the end of the age. He sees the glory of God the Creator in radiance and majesty. God’s still in charge.

In chapter 5, John sees a scroll in God’s right hand. It’s been inscribed on both sides, meaning its pages are full. The whole truth is to be revealed.

It’s also sealed with seven seals. The number “7” in Revelation always symbolizes perfection. John weeps because no one is worthy to open the perfectly sealed scroll that will disclose what is to happen. Don’t get hung up on silly questions like “Why is John crying in heaven?” This is a vision, and weird things happen.

One of the elders alludes to Isaiah’s vision. “The Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has triumphed” (5). It’s remarkable that David’s legacy is so dominant, even here in visions of the end. That is because it’s not about David. It’s about God’s promises to Israel, and David marked the zenith of the kingdom. There was a large and flourishing tree under David. All the Babylonians left was a stump.

John turns to see this Lion (6), but he sees a Lamb – appearing at once to be both dead and alive – “slaughtered but standing tall” (*The Message*). He has seven horns (perfect power) and seven eyes (perfect knowledge), sent by the seven spirits (the perfect Spirit of God, as in Isaiah 11:2). He takes the scroll, surrounded by the GOATS of heaven (Greatest of All Time angels) and the elders representing Israel and the church.

The 24 elders are holding bowls representing the prayers of God’s people, all the times saints of old and you and I prayed, “Your kingdom come, your will be done,” all the time we said, “God, please, please put an end to suffering and injustice and disease and conflict.” And we thought he wasn’t listening.

The four living creatures and the 24 elders sing a new song to Jesus – the Lion of Judah and the Lamb of God – whose blood has purchased a global kingdom of priests who will reign on the earth forever and ever. His death was essential to eternal life. The chapter closes with a perfect song of praise – seven tributes to the one on the throne and to the Lamb – Father and Son equally worshiped as God.

Isaiah 11 is heaven on earth. Revelation 5 brings earth to heaven and back again. In chapter 22, Jesus says, “I am the Root and the Offspring of David.” He both precedes and follows David, and ties the entire story of God’s redemption together.

The Super Stump

A second set of tree images capturing my imagination this week are from the [national parks of Vancouver, Canada](#). These timberland canopies were leveled by the Canadian Pacific Railway in 1885. A forest of giant trees became a landscape of super stumps. A whole forest of ancient Israels.

The story didn't end there. Partly through human ingenuity (turning stumps into homes) but mostly as an illustration of God's regenerative nature, the super stumps illustrate this truth: No ending is the final story when there's God. Today many of those stumps have given rise to new shoots or even trees. The stump of David's kingdom created and is still creating a global work of God about which Jesus said, "The gates of hell will not stop its advance" (Matthew 16:18).

At times it feels like the Church, as we knew it, is dead. Don't you ever believe that. There will be deaths of movements and leaders and ideas and even churches – but the Church is a God-thing, created and sustained by the Root of Jesse.

The issue is not whether the Church will survive and thrive. The question is whether you will be a part of it. Will you be faithful to Jesus and will you invest yourself in his Church? All through Advent as we think about the reign of Jesus now and forever I'm asking who's in? What the pandemic has done is to push church to the sidelines for so many people who were thoroughly invested in the body of Christ two years ago.

We've changed our habits – setting aside those that nourish our intimacy with Jesus and connection to each other, and replacing that time and focus with things that matter less – or, in some cases, habits that can destroy us. That's why each week I'm mentioning briefly a book I am reading this month called *Do It for a Day: How to Make or Break Any Habit in 30 Days*. My reading today for Day 5 in the book is about choosing to make yourself accountable for the change in habits.

Are all your habits good ones? If not, what are you doing about them? If this book isn't your strategy, what is? The Root of David will ensure that his kingdom will flourish in time and eternity. It's going to happen with or without you because of Who he is. Now's the time to start planning how 2022 will draw you back into his plans.

Here's a rarely sung verse of one of the great hymns of Advent.

*O Come, O Branch of Jesse's stem – unto your own and rescue them
From depths of hell your people save; And give them victory o'er the grave.
Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel shall come to thee, O Israel. Amen.*