

I have to ask, did you hear ‘the word of the Lord’ in that genealogy from Matthew? All those names, many of them hard to pronounce... Never heard of those people before?

But you know some of them, especially Abraham and David...

It was because Joseph was one of those on the family tree of David that he made the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem.

And by our prophecy from Isaiah, the child born to Mary and Joseph in Bethlehem, Jesus, would be the culminating branch on this stump of Jesse.

Jesse was the father of the great King David, and this passage in Isaiah is the source of the tradition of the Jesse Tree.

In Church art, a design developed showing the relationship of Jesus with Jesse and other biblical characters.

This “Jesse Tree” showed a tree with many branches growing from a reclining figure of Jesse. The various branches had pictures of other Old and New Testament figures who were ancestors of Jesus.

At the top of the tree was Mary holding the baby Jesus.

But the Jesse Tree is more than a ‘blood’ genealogy. It’s also a ‘faith’ genealogy. Paul writes about it in his letter to the Romans, how we are grafted as branches into this tree that bears fruit for Jesus Christ.

In fact, the newest branch for this Jesse Tree is Olivia Lynn Jordan, as she was baptized, grafted into the family of faith.

As a sister of Christ, she now shares this ‘faith’ genealogy with Jesus. Just like we do, branches on the Jesse Tree.

So, on this first Sunday of Advent, let’s think about how we tell Olivia about her family tree, what it means to all of us about these branches on the Jesse Tree.

Let’s imagine that we are tracing our faith genealogy, like that TV show “Finding Your Roots” with the historian Henry Gates.

As we move backwards from Jesus through that list in Matthew...we discover those ancestors like Zadok (no, that’s not a Star Wars character) and Jehoshaphat (yes, that’s the ‘jumping Jehoshaphat’).

And we can skip over that story about King David and that woman who had been Uriah’s wife, and then we come to that name, Jesse, and what we learn from Mr. Gates is that that our family ancestor, Jesse, was called a “stump”.

He refers us to our passage in Isaiah and reminds us that Isaiah was writing when our faith ancestors had been devastated by wars and deportations and exile and evil kings.

They had endured the hard life that comes with being the little guy, and now, after being picked on and picked over for so many generations, they were about as lifeless as a tree stump.

Do you ever feel that way? I mean, a tree stump is a tree stump, right? Nothing can emerge from a stump. Can it?

Perhaps what Isaiah is trying to get across is that just when our dreams of peace and love are dashed, and we think there is no hope, that is when God does God’s best work.

Because from this stump will come God’s word, these names of real people will carry it, and it will be a good word, a word full of hope simply because God is the source of that hope:

*“The spirit of the LORD will rest on him,”* says Isaiah, *“the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.”*

Is Isaiah's hopeful prediction about a Messiah whose wisdom, understanding, knowledge, reverence for God, and sense of power will produce righteous judgment too good to be true?

Let's be honest, we don't live in a peaceful world. Wolves and lambs don't share the same meadows, and leopards don't sleep with goats. Calves and lions don't travel together. Children aren't safe around people, not to mention snakes.

We live in a world where children are surrounded by violence, suffering, and anxiety. We live in a world where poor people struggle to feed, clothe, house, and sustain themselves and their families.

We live in a world where people of all persuasions struggle to find peace, struggle to avoid becoming victims of fear and prejudice, politics and greed.

The question is, how do we embrace Isaiah's vision and become partners with God in his desire to make right that which is wrong, and to correct that which is upside down and catawampus to his eternal desires?

Isaiah would tell us that our hope emerges from something that, with all intents and purposes, is dead...he says that even from a stump, God is able, to bring forth a green shoot that will become a branch and then a mighty tree.

Walter Brueggemann, the insightful Old Testament scholar, points out that the prophets always talk about “what if.”

They're always casting their vision beyond the present moment to that day and time when peace will prevail, when God's purpose will be done, when all things will be made to be the way God originally intended them to be.

Brueggemann suggests that the prophet's words start to become true when we begin to live *as if...* as if they were already true.

You see, our hope is not based upon what we can do, but what God can do. And we are talking about a God who can turn chaos into order, evil into good, fear into courage, sorrow into joy, failure into freedom, and death into life.

We are talking about a God who is for us, a God who has made the decision not to give up on the world but redeem it, not trash it but restore it.

We are talking about a God who sent his son to be the visible image of the invisible God so we could know him and not be afraid of him. We are talking about a God who sent his own son to show us how to live and then die for us so we could live.

We are talking about a God who raised his son from the dead so that we might know that no enemy is greater than he is, or as John Claypool says, “That we may know that God's goodness is greater than all our badness.”

Christian hope, quite simply, is based on the undeviating, enduring, lasting, everlasting, eternal, undying, stable, unending reliability of God.

I remember reading something that Helen Keller said. You remember that she was deaf and blind but could see and hear the heart of the world. She said: “The world is filled with trouble this Christmas.”

Then she corrected herself and started over, “No, no, no! I didn't mean that. The world is filled with people who are trying to overcome troubles and filled with people trying to help them.”

Those people, I would tell Olivia Lynn Jordan, these people helping other people are the branches on the Jesse Tree, on our family tree of faith.

TO GOD BE THE GLORY.