

“The Stump of Jesse”

Matthew 3:1-12

Again, we gather this evening and continue our Advent journey focusing on the theme “We Begin with the End.” Last week, we heard the Lord say, “Behold, I am making all things new.” This week, we hear the words of John the Baptist, the Advent prophet: “Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.”

“Even now.” Jesus has not even started His public ministry. John has not even baptized Jesus. “Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” He is talking about olive trees. I know I have talked about this recently, but it amazes me that olive trees never die unless you tear up the roots. If you cut off an olive tree and leave even the stump of a trunk, a new branch, a new tree will come forth.

Isaiah uses this image to describe the coming of Christ. Jesse is the father of David. The Christ was to be of the house and line of David.

Isaiah says, “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a

branch from his roots shall bear fruit” [Is. 11:1]. The words of the prophet are words of hope. So long as there is a stump, a new branch, a new tree will always come forth. In this we have absolute confidence.

The coming of Christ from the house of Jesse, from the house and line of David was a promise met with absolute confidence. There was a stump and the roots had not been destroyed. That was the image offered by Isaiah. Christ would come. Christ has come.

John has a different message. “Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees.” Even now the refiner’s fire is coming. “He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and with fire.” The wheat He will gather into His barn, “but the chaff He will burn with unquenchable fire.” “We begin with the End.”

Jesus’ ministry is often misunderstood. So many imagine that He came to teach us how to live a better life. The “How to’s” of Christian living is a popular topic for religious books. Jesus did not enter this world as the Lamb of God so that He could prepare you for day to day life and how to best deal with difficult co-workers.

Jesus came as the Lamb of God to take away the sin of the world and to prepare you for Judgment Day. Christ has come. Christ will come again. From the beginning, He came to prepare you for the End. What else matters? “What does it profit a man to gain the whole world yet forfeit his soul?” Israel is described as an unproductive tree. If an olive tree quit bearing good fruit, then it was time to cut out the roots and start over.

Christ has come, and it is time for an end and a new beginning. The word of warning is for the people of God who are no longer bearing good fruit. Preparing your heart for Christ to come is what you are called to do. Your job is for you to be prepared for the End. It is a time to repent. It is a time to forgive. It is a time to fix broken relationships. It is a time to look to Christ and see what He has already done.

The stump of Jesse assured by the prophet Isaiah meant that a new reality was guaranteed. New life would come – a new beginning to prepare you for the End. When Christ entered the world as the Lamb of God, the choirs of angels sang, Good News of salvation was proclaimed, God’s plan to redeem His people was revealed. Nothing could stop this from continuing forward.

God knows what the plan is and how it will be accomplished. Nothing surprises Him. His concern is that nothing surprises you. You have been led to repentance. You have been forgiven by God Himself. Christ has already come and has fixed your broken relationship with God your Father and Creator.

Be prepared. "Even now, the axe is laid to the root of the trees." You are a child of God with the faith of Abraham. Your faith has been credited to you as righteousness. In response to this new reality, you are the tree that must bear good fruit. That is how you prepare for the coming of Christ.

We begin with the End. All of our preparation, everything we do is so that when Christ comes and separates the wheat from the chaff, we can greet that day with the utmost confidence that there is nothing that can prevent God from carrying out His plan for our salvation.

Like the stump of Jesse, we look to the promises of God and know with absolute assurance Christ has come and Christ is coming. Amen.