

Second Sunday in Advent

SILVICULTURE

Isaiah 11:1-10

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Analysis by Jerome Burce

*1 A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

*2 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.*

*3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;*

*4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.*

*5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.*

*6 The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.*

*7 The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;
and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.*

*8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.*

9 They will not hurt or destroy

*on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.*

*10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the
peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling
shall be glorious.*

*Tip: Think of Advent not merely as a Christmas prelude but
rather as an overture for the entire church year. Suddenly the
season makes sense (cf. “How I Finally Got
Advent,” <https://crossings.org/thursday/2004/thur122304.shtml>).
More to the point, one grasps the reason for preaching or
praying on the great prophetic texts that the season features.
“Here, folks, is the agenda, cosmic and grand, laid out for us
by God through Israel’s prophets. With the new year beginning we
put it up front for all to see all over again. Then, starting
with Christmas, we’ll take the next eleven months to see yet
again what the Church’s apostles saw, how God is getting it done
through the person and work of Jesus, God’s Messiah. For now a
hint. After that stay tuned. Alleluia!”*

*Quick reminder: the LORD—capital letters—is a pious substitute
for the four-lettered proper name of Israel’s god, as opposed to
Chemosh of Moab, Moluch of Tyre, Marduk of Mesopotamia, and a
host of others. To forget that is to miss the astounding
chutzpah—and scandal—of prophetic assertion, not only in today’s
text but throughout the corpus. “Our god rules. Yours doesn’t.”
Or worse, “Yours is a phony.” We’re not dealing here with polite
pluralists. Anything but.*

DIAGNOSIS: Stumped

Step 1: Initial Diagnosis (External Problem) : Clueless

As today's younger set might say on a first hearing of this text, this is S000 not us. How come? What's the critical component of Isaiah's fantastic future that's missing still from our own dreary, deadly present? "The knowledge of the LORD," the prophet says (v. 9b). In a word, we're stumped. Clueless. A light year or two from "getting it" when it comes to Israel's god. Take for example today's agnostic American. Like his ancient Assyrian counterpart he can't begin to imagine that he strides the earth purely at the LORD's beck and call (5:26, 7:18). Or how about today's pragmatic Christian who, in her heaping up of tithes, prayers, praise songs, or the edited texts of the latest politically-correct hymnbook, apes the sacrificing votaries of ancient Jerusalem (1:11). As if dreck like this will keep the LORD from noticing our complicity in the national fascinaiton with wealth, glamour, celebrity and self-indulgence (cf. 5:8, 3:16). As if our pieties will blind him to the latest stats on U.S. poverty rates; or on broken homes and the semi-orphanans who inhabit them, their numbers skyrocketing; or on the correlation between favorable outcomes in court and the ability to pay for a pricey lawyer (cf. 1:17, 23). Meanwhile we chant "God Bless America" at our seventh inning stretches, expecting that whoever we're singing to will jump to our tune. Those who do this know nothing of the LORD.

Step 2: Advanced Diagnosis (Internal Problem) : *Just Plain Fearless*

"Then again," says the ancient Assyrian, "why should I know the LORD, that two-bit deity of a paltry people?" "I'm with you, bro," says the snappy American hipster, exulting as ever in the god-free pretensions of the current age. "I'm shocked," gasps the latter fellow's pious Christian counterpart. But notice how quick she is to write the LORD off herself. "I can't believe," she'll say (echoing Marcion), "in a god who would sic a savage Assyrian army on a country he wanted to punish." "My God isn't

like that," she'll say, in a tone that imputes wickedness of anyone—Isaiah, for example—who should think to challenge her. Does she notice how similar to the Assyrian she's become in her contempt for the LORD? Or how the god she embraces at the LORD's expense is an appalling deity who either winks at the evil she participates in or is simply too weak to counteract it? Does she care that in condemning the LORD for hunting down the leopard she condones the slaughter of the kid and denies the widow's right to call on an ultimate Defender? No, she doesn't. Why? Because at day's end she can't shake the hipster's habit of judging on the strength of the modern eye-and-ear that deems "the fear of the LORD" (v. 3) to be absurd. Between her and the hipster the only argument is whether the LORD is unrighteous or non-existent. In chimes the old Assyrian who calls him negligible. "Agreed," says Jerusalem's king as he scouts around for allies. For want of faith they are all without fear, and their arrogance is brazen.

Step 3: Final Diagnosis (Eternal Problem) : *The Falling Axe*

The dust swirls these days where Nineveh once stood, and the wind that drives it shrieks with the terror of Assyria's collapse. Was this merely a happenstance of history as we moderns will assert? To our horror and disgust Isaiah says no, a word that shuts our eyes, stops our ears, and closes our minds precisely as the LORD intends for it to do (6:10). It's our turn to suffer the fate that swallowed our forebears. Again, their arrogance is ours. Our failure to fear the LORD despoils the earth just as theirs brought hurt and destruction to the holy mountain, Zion (cf. v. 9). The LORD's reaction? He lets the trees grow tall and mighty. Then he brings them low, using one as the axe in the felling of the other (2:11-13; 10:5-6, 15-19, 33-34). As with Israel and Judah, Aram (7:8) and Assyria, so with every people and land, our own included (yes, America, you too). I die, you die, the nation too will perish. "Destruction

is decreed, overflowing with righteousness" (10:22). So says the LORD. Our outrage at this—our adamant refusal to countenance our own destruction let alone to call it righteous—serves merely to ensure that the LORD will cut us down, the stumps remaining, nothing more...

PROGNOSIS: Ramified

Step 4: Initial Prognosis (Eternal Solution) : *The Sudden Sprout*

Nothing more, that is, except the "word of our God" that "will stand forever": as Isaiah (or his successor?) will later observe (40:8). In the present case that word is a magnificent promise, breathtaking in sweep and splendor, of the kind that God alone can effect. It starts with a branch sprouting from the least of the stumps, the remnant of David's father, Jesse (v. 1). What reality does the metaphor describe? Isaiah can't say, of course. It lies in his future. It will fall to the Church's apostles to start jumping with joy as they point to the one and only person who fills the bill, Jesus in his name: Scion of Jesse (Matt. 1:6, 16); Son of God (Mark 1:1); the one on whom "the spirit of the LORD" has rested (v. 2, 61:1; Luke 4:18). In him the wolf and the lamb cohabit (v. 6). Notice, for example, how in more or less the same breath he snarls critics into silence and gently blesses children; how he ratchets up the wrath and rigor of the law and yet "decides with equity for the meek of the earth" (v. 4), dispensing kindness without regard for legal status or accomplishment (Mark 10:2-9, 13-16). Much more to the apostolic point: see how God—the LORD of course, who else?—uses Jesus' enemies and their infernal cross as an axe to lay him low (Acts 2:23), God himself enduring Judah's fate in the person of Judah's ultimate king (cf. Luke 23:38). Ah, and then the sprout, or rather a mighty branch shooting suddenly from the stump on the third day. "This Jesus God raised up, and of that all of us are witnesses" (Acts 2:32). Promise kept, in other words.

Step 5: Advanced Prognosis (Internal Solution) : *Fearfully Fearless*

Then the branch sprouts leaves, the resurrected Jesus passing to others the same “spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD” that has rested on him (v. 2; John 20:22). Knowledge? Call it faith, at least for now; faith as in the animating confidence that the LORD keeps his promises and is not content with stumps where trees once stood. Behold that “root of Jesse,” now standing as “a signal to the peoples” (v. 10); and yes, the first effect of tumbling to that signal is “the fear of the LORD,” a fear that takes the form of repentance and results in a rush of delight (v. 3). Repentance is seen in the form of our friend the pious Christian noticing, as if for the first time, how the LORD himself endured hurt and destruction on his holy mountain for the sake of ending destruction (v. 9). Recalling her suspicion that the LORD was unrighteous she joins the likes of Peter in blushing for shame—and tastes as he did her Christ’s forgiveness. Righteous and faithful is he, true to his promise (v. 5). Or see repentance in our other friend, the hipster, revisiting this Jesus fellow who refuses to go away. For once he cans the pose of his post-modern irony and takes a straightforward, thinking look. Will he come away with prior assumptions shattered and a brand new reverence for God and all his works, both wrathful and gracious? Why not? It has happened before to persons beyond counting—persons who promptly start dashing around the world without heed for its dangers, like toddlers toying with asps (v. 8), so eager are they to pass the promise along. [See the book of Acts; for that matter go visit a missionary.]

Step 6: Final Prognosis (External Solution) : *Branching Out*

In a change of voice: “Yes, dear adolescent, that world Isaiah describes is so not us. Then again, it’s more us than it was when your grandparents were teens. They knew Jim Crow. You

don't. Or at least you know enough to hold it in contempt. You also know, as they did not, of outfits like Doctors without Borders, or Amnesty International, and you hear of billionaires shedding hunks of their wealth to fight malaria or combat poverty and you yourself have been invited to feed a child for a day. It ain't the peacable kingdom, not by a light-year's shot. Nor will it be until the day your Lord Je sus Christ unleashes the "rod of his mouth" (v. 4) to finish what he started. Yet even now "the nations...inquire of him" (v. 10). Where else did folks who loathe religion get their ideas about the intrinsic value of every human being? Or the wickedness of sorting people by race or creed or gender and favoring some at the expense of the others? How is it that you yourself will bump now and then into acts of mercy in the least expected places, the powerful giving way in favor of the weak? Guess what? There's more "knowledge of the LORD" out there than we dare to think (v. 9b), and even where it isn't the LORD keeps getting his way. As for you, child, it's time to lead them (v. 6b). Strut your stuff. Flaunt your faith. Go nuts with forgiveness. Remember the poor. Play with adders while you're at it. Above all stick with Jesus, and look with eager longing for that day when all is new and good and sweet and right. It's on its way!