

Isaiah 11:1

When walking through the woods, every now and then you come across, or perhaps trip over, a tree stump. It may be a skinny stump or a wide stump, a freshly made stump or an old rotting stump. But in every case one thing you know for certain--where that stump is, there once was a living tree. And for some reason, maybe the tree was diseased and dying, maybe it was cut down with an axe and used for firewood; however it happened, a tree was once there.

This describes God's people of Judah in the time of Isaiah. The prophet pictures Judah as a tree. It began as a sapling as all trees begin. From the seed of Abraham, through Isaac and Jacob, God brought forth His people. In Egypt His people grew into a great nation. But Pharaoh became frightened of this tree and he put a fence around it and cut off tender, young branches from it. He enslaved God's people and killed every male child born to them. But God led His tree out of their slavery through Moses and brought it to the Promised Land of Canaan. There it flourished under the rule of the Judges and great kings like David and Solomon. The people of Judah, with Jerusalem as their capital city, became a magnificent tree, one which towered over all the other trees of the world.

But the tree was sick inside. Sin, like a disease, was eating away at this beautiful tree. God's people forsook His ways and Commandments. He sent prophets to warn them again and again, but they ignored them, rejected them, and even killed some of them. God was not pleased. The beautiful tree He had created was dying from the inside out. What do you do with a dead tree? You cut it down. And that is what God did to Judah. "Behold," cries the prophet Isaiah in Chapter 10, "The Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power, the great in height will be hewn down...with an axe."

The axe God would use to cut down His people was their enemy. As God used the Assyrians to cut off the Northern Kingdom of Israel, so He would use the Babylonians to cut away the Southern Kingdom of Judah. They came into the land and attacked it. They destroyed the cities, leveled the temple, and led the people away into captivity. The axe of God had done its job. Judah, the once mighty tree, had become a stump.

Our own nation is a magnificent tree in its own right. For more than 200 years we have grown into one of the mightiest trees in the world. Yet is it not true that our nation, as Judah was, is dying from the inside out? Trees do not last forever in this changing world. And when a seemingly strong tree like our own allows, and even protects, abortion and homosexuality; when her people continuously rebel against authority; when tolerance of every false religion and way of life becomes the accepted standard, is the day not approaching when God may allow our tree to be cut down to a stump?

But I'm not here today to preach to the citizens of America. God has called me here to preach to you, His people, and to warn you that your own life, your own heart may be ready for the axe. Are you and I better than God's people of Judah? Are we living according to His Commandments? Are our lives free from sinfulness? No friends, we are just as guilty, just as condemned as they were. And as God sent John the Baptist to swing His axe at His people at the Jordan River, so He has called me to swing the same axe at you. The words of John are also for you and me to hear..."Repent! Turn away from your sinfulness. Repent!"

Now when God wields His axe there is love and mercy in His swing. It is not God's desire to cut you off from Him. He swings the axe of His Law to humble us, to bring us to our knees in repentance, to

turn us away from our sinful ways and draw us to Himself. When He chops away with His Law He fully desires to bring forth new life in us through His Gospel.

God did this for His people of Judah. "There shall come forth a shoot," says Isaiah, "from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots will bear fruit." God would bring His people back. A remnant would return, and through them, though they had become a tree stump, He would bring forth life. Through that stump the Savior would come. Through them Jesus would be born.

What God did for Judah He also did for you. In your baptism God swung His axe at you. He cut away and put to death the Old Adam in us which we inherited from our parents. And then through the water of life He caused a living branch to grow within you. Jesus came to live in your heart, and He would bear fruit within you--the good deeds of the Christian life. And so as I look around this room I see, not dead stumps, but beautiful, living trees. Much more beautiful than even this decorated tree up here. You are beautiful trees because Jesus lives in you, and through you He is producing good works which are your shining decorations.

Oh it's true that every now and then a branch of selfishness will spring forth from within us, or a branch of gossip, lust, greed, or jealousy. And these branches need quickly to be cut off before they become thick, strong branches. That's why we need to be in God's House often, so He can keep swinging the axe of His Law at us to cut off our sinful branches, to cut away at the wickedness, the Old Adam, which keeps rising again in our heart each day.

But then He heals the wounds where His axe cut away, with His words of mercy and love. God does not want you to be a tree with no branches, and so when He cuts away your sinful branches, He keeps putting Christ within you again and again. He does this by forgiving your sins. He does this at His Communion Table. He does this so that good branches grow out from within you...branches of love and generosity, kindness, joy, peace, patience, faithfulness, and self control.

And so, friend, do you have wounds today...wounds to be healed? Has God's axe done its work on you? Then hear these words and take them to heart. He forgives your sins. He does not reject you. He loves you. His Son died for you. Jesus was cut off in your place. Jesus was rejected for you. He felt the axe of God's punishment so that you may know the peace of God's loving-kindness.

Even John the Baptist, who swung with great strength the axe of God's Law, did not swing the axe just to hurt God's people. After swinging the axe, he pointed them to Christ. "Behold," he cried, "God's Lamb who takes your sins away." And so for you, friend, I point you now to the bread and wine. Here is Christ for you. Here is His blood shed for you. Here is forgiveness for your sins, healing for your wounds. Here is life for the stump you once were. But which you are no longer. Rather you now are trees, beautiful trees. Trees I am honored to serve as your pastor. Trees who know that you are loved by God, and who therefore, love each other. Trees made beautiful through Jesus Christ. Amen.