

Only when visiting a farm surrounded by forested acreage, did I quickly learn how little I knew. While splitting some firewood, I quickly noticed how much heavier (denser) some wood was than other, even pieces of the same size. I inquired “why,” and was told that it all had to do with the density of the wood, which varied considerably. The oak was the heaviest by far. I was amazed at how much wood we dragged from the forest. Was there a storm? “All the time,” came the response. Branches fall down every single week and need to be cleared. Today’s Advent readings even bear this out.

Both in Isaiah’s prophecy and our Gospel, the Holy Spirit paints a picture of the need to prune the forest. Israel was once like a thriving forest, but when the people neglected God, they stopped producing fruit and foliage. Isaiah depicts Israel as a lifeless, faithless, petrified forest that was about to be cleared out. Only the stumps and roots of the once mighty forest of Israel would remain.

Isaiah’s prophecy made clear—the ruthless nation from the North was to be God’s hand of judgment on rebellious Israel. With one sweep of the forester’s ax Israel was cut down— Assyria wrested them from their land. The imagery suggests the moral bankruptcy of the Israelite monarchy, and the need for a new beginning, to spring from the very origin from which David and his dynasty arose.¹

The leaders of Israel were willing to trade the prosperity of the Lord’s way for the poverty of idolatry. Isaiah describes Israel’s rebellion in the first ten chapters. He writes, “Woe to those who call evil good and good evil, who put darkness for light and light for darkness.” With these words Isaiah tells us that the mighty oaks

¹ Cf. New American Bible footnote on Isaiah 11:1

were long gone– but it does not end there. The prophecy of Isaiah left room for hope, the hope that comes when even the forest begins to blossom again, a “shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse.”

What is the message here for us? Today’s prophecy about the root of Jesse serves as both a challenge and a reminder that a stump is not dead, and that a root, though not visible above ground, reveals new life just below the surface, sometimes spreading far and deep. While clearly it appears that the reality of the Church is as a counter balance to today’s society, the message remains timeless. Culture changes, but the fundamentals of the Faith endure.

We ought never to think that the faith is dying, nor lose hope with respect to the life of faith in others, whether loved ones who may be struggling or society in general. Giving up is not an option; selling the grace of God short will surely backfire. We are graced this year with the longest possible Advent, precious time in which to prepare a place in our hearts, time to live in hopeful expectation, and time to spread the joy of the Gospel to any and all who will listen.

We must neither be deterred nor despair; we remain joyful and serene, for this is what Christians do. The Church is still the Bride of Christ, even if She appears little more than a stump to some. She remains a prophetic voice in the world. Both by his lifestyle and his message, John the Baptist challenged people to examine their conscience, to look deeper into their hearts, to change their ways.

It looks like winter is finally making its appearance! We are settling in for the duration, but before you know it, in early April, the tiniest shoots, the buds, will begin to blossom, a full 120 days from now. But we will be there, we will wait and we will hope and the Lord will not delay.