

Primary Readings: Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Driving through Custer State Park the other day, a state trooper pulls a car over and asks the gentleman driving, “Sir, these winding roads are dangerous enough, would you like to tell me why you were weaving all over the road for the last few miles?”

The driver says to the state trooper, “I’m so glad you’re here, the strangest thing happened. I was driving along when I looked up and there was a tree – right in front of me! I swerved to the left and there was another tree in front of me. I swerved again to the right and there was another tree in front of me!”

With this, an understanding grin comes over the mouth of the state trooper. He reaches in the window to the rearview mirror and says to the driver, “Sir, I’d recommend you take your air freshener off when you drive.”¹

I know it’s a pretty bad joke, but would you say *the driver couldn’t see the forest for the trees?*

Well, today we too seem unable to avoid talk about trees! The trees outside still glitter with the recent snowfall. Our sanctuary is filled for the first time again this year with a beautiful tree, not to mention a stump of a tree from the children’s message with its own “sort of beauty.”

And, our readings also – nearly every one of them – has something to say about trees. It’s hard to miss John the Baptist’s rather sharp and simple sermon, “Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” Because he says, “even now an ax is lying at the root of the trees; and every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”

Or Isaiah’s description of the family tree of Israel being once like a stump, cut-off from God. But even now, Isaiah mysteriously tells us (and

¹ Joke adapted from: www.basicjokes.com/djoke.php?id=199

the second reading from Romans echoes the prophecy again): “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of its roots.”

My mother works with a different sort of trees. Like Les McClanahan, she’s a “genealogist” and has done quite extensive work studying my *family tree*. She could tell you all about my great-grandmother (who I received my first name from her maiden name): Kate Kent Morris.

She lived to the age of 99. I remember visiting her (and being taller than her!) when I was just a five-year-old young sapling and she was already an ‘old-growth-tree’ somewhere in her 90’s. Despite her height though she continues to be a towering legacy in my family tree.

Or, like every family tree, I have less healthy, more painful parts as well. My uncle Jimmy, who died just a few years ago as a relatively young man. His body simply shut down from the years of drug and alcohol abuse.

Again, when I was very young, I remember our family receiving letters in the mail from Jimmy during the few years he spent in prison for a couple of DUI’s. At my age, the letters from prison made a sharp impression on me. And for some reason, I remember being amazed by the beauty of his hand-writing – in all capital letters – a style of writing that I’ve also inherited. But even more profoundly, I wrestled with these letters, knowing that I was tied mysteriously to this person that society said at best was of little value and at worst was a burden.

How do you deal with the parts of your family tree that would be easiest to bury deep underground?

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance,” John the Baptist says. What might this mean during this time of year when families gather together – sometimes with *such high hopes* that everything will be perfect. Hope that the expensive gift that will be *exactly* what they wanted. *Or even higher hopes* that *maybe this will be the year* when the family will be blessed with the gift of forgiveness... Or even just *hope* that the same old argument won’t erupt over the dinner table like a food fight of words.

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance” says our Gospel today. What might this mean during this time of year when we as individuals are sometimes buried with *so little hope*. No longer feeling like a whole tree, but barely

feeling like a stump – chopped down. Maybe cut-off from family. Maybe cut-off from friends. Maybe cut-off from God.

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance.” What might repentance have to do with this season of Advent – this season of preparing for Christmas? Last week’s great symbol was an alarm clock. And the message was *Wake Up!* How’s a stump with an ax lying next to it an appropriate symbol for preparing for Christmas? Not exactly what you see in most downtown storefronts this time of year.

It seems to me, there might be a temptation to see our whole lives as one great tree – and some branches of our lives would best be chopped out and used for fire. It seems to me, this is often what we think about *repentance*.

But with this kind of *repentance* – swinging away with our ax to chop out sin – if we pursue our work to its end, we end up doing one of two things... Chopping down ourselves so we feel like barely a stump or very quickly jumping from trimming branches on our own trees to clipping branches of our neighbor’s tree.

A study came out last week which interviewed about 500 “workplace managers” and “college students.” It found that often individuals who described themselves as “*exceptionally moral*,” were extremely open in also describing how and where they had cut ethical corners, justifying it with their good intentions.²

“Bear fruit worthy of repentance.”

Maybe there is a different way to honor Advent’s theme of repentance... by admitting that we do not have all of the answers – for others or even for ourselves... OR, admitting that we treat many challenges in our lives and our relationships as problems (branches to be burned), when in reality they are mysteries.

Because dealing with problems is easier. You can isolate them, chop ‘em off and throw ‘em in the fire. “Problems have solutions or at least potential solutios.” And friends in Christ, if we ultimately view our lives as

² Reported in “When do-gooders go bad” in *The Week* (Volume 7: Issue 339) – December 7, 2007, page 24.

problems – I think we will all end up as stumps that are only good for fire wood.

But “mysteries have depths. Mysteries are unfathomable.”³ And life–*YOU* were not created by God as a problem. Your whole family tree – all of history – was not created by God as *a problem*. It was created, *you were created*, stamped with the image of God and declared good, holy, even *sacred!* Infused with God’s presence.

There are problems in this world. But *perhaps more problems come* when we think *we can wield the ax*, we can chop out every problem in the world or in our lives – we can isolate what’s wrong in our family tree and reconcile it by violence or by tearing it down or just ignoring the uncle in prison.

Advent is not about preparing to solve a problem, but about preparing our lives to be open to the *mystery* – ‘cause when Christ comes we probably won’t have a clue what to do! Advent is about setting the ax down for a moment or two, waiting patiently for the mystery to grow like a shoot coming out from a stump that we didn’t think could sustain life. Like a branch growing out of roots that we only knew to be drowning in bad blood.

So let us prepare this Advent first by remembering that all creation, all life... *You!* were not created as a problem, but as a beautiful mystery. *You and the family tree of all history* were created by God to *bear fruit worthy of the mystery that is Emmanuel: “God among us.”*

And this *God among us* is a much better pruner than we are. So let us also prepare this Advent by putting down the ax and letting God be born into our family trees again like new life growing out of a dead stump.

And so, *may the God of hope fill each of us* – this Advent – *with all joy and peace in believing, so that we may abound in hope – bearing fruit worthy of repentance! – by the power of the Holy Spirit. Amen.*

³ This distinction between *problem* and *mystery* comes from Martin Marty’s analysis of Gabriel Marcel. He discusses it in his book *The Mystery of the Child* and talked about it in an interview with Bill Moyers on *The Journal* (August 17, 2007) – www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/08172007/transcript2.html.