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Midweek Advent II  
11 December 2013  
Grace and Trinity Lutheran Churches, Wichita  
Isaiah 11:1-10

*In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit*

There's a huge tree:

thick trunk—it's been there for years;  
long, reaching branches, providing shade and darkness to whatever gathers below;  
and it's tall—stretching above all the other trees in the forest—  
none is as glorious and strong.

And there's a man at the base.

He's no Paul Bunyan, but he's got his axe in hand and ready to chop the tree down.

Now everyone looking at this from the outside would scream,

“STOP! Put the axe down!”

“Who could chop down a tree this size?”

“Look at its beauty and its strength!”

But what they don't know, Isaiah tells us.

The image of the tree is humanity—those created by Almighty God.

Their strength is seen in the mighty kingdoms of this world—

at the time of Isaiah, it was the Assyrians;

but it just as well could've been the Babylonians or the Persians,

the Greeks or the Romans, or even today, America.

The strength of the nations was certainly a sight to behold.

But as it is with those in power, they became corrupted.

Pride got the best of them.

Pretty soon their victories were on account of the strength of their army,

or the swiftness of their horses,

or their brilliantly executed battle plans.

No longer was it the Lord who gave the growth—the sun and the rain and so forth—

but the tree began to depend on itself.

It had forgotten its maker and provider.

And the man standing at the root of the tree was Isaiah;

and a bit later on, it was John the Baptizer—

*“Even now the axe is laid to the root of the trees.*

*Every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.”*

(Mt 3:10)

Just before our reading in Isaiah 11, we hear this:

*“Behold, the Lord God of hosts will lop the boughs with terrifying power;*

*the great in height will be hewn down, and the lofty will be brought low.*

*He will cut down the thickets of the forest with an axe,*

*and Lebanon will fall by the Majestic One.” (Isa 10:33-34)*

The man with the axe stands there still today.  
 He's the Lord's man—though he doesn't always look like it.  
 He's the Lord's man with the Lord's Word—  
     but those on the outside constantly cry out,  
     “STOP! PUT THE AXE DOWN!”

From the outside it looks foolish to call a sin, sin.  
 It looks foolish to call people to repent of things they've got a million excuses for.  
     It's not their fault, it's just the situation they're in;  
     or it's because of something their parents did or did not do years ago;  
     or it's really for the good for the most people, even if it does hurt one or two.

Those on the outside can't begin to make sense of the call to humility, and downward mobility.  
 Success is the name of the game: growth, power, progress.

And yet the man of God still stands there, with his axe in hand, ready to lay low the lofty.

Again, this is all foolishness—  
     both the image of the man sent to cut down the large tree,  
     but also the preacher calling sinners to repentance.

It's foolish to hold people to the Lord's standards, especially in today's age!  
     That marriage is between a man and a woman,  
         and that sex is a gift for the married only.  
     That pornography really does hurt others, not just yourself.  
     That homosexuality's an abomination to the Lord's institution of marriage,  
         even if someone's born with those instincts.  
     That finding comfort in drunkenness denies the comfort of our Lord.

It's foolish to say that there's only one way of salvation;  
     and that it's done by someone other than ourselves.

And yet the man of God stands—preaching with the axe of repentance.  
 He calls a spade a spade—  
     showing our sin in the light of the Law,  
     and exhorting us to live accordingly.

Every word of the Law is another swipe at our deviant branches.  
 The axe faces us up to the Lord's will.  
 And whatever's out of line, is lopped off.  
 And while this pruning looks like utter foolishness in the eyes of the world,  
     what they don't know is that the root is Jesse's Root (Isa 11:10).

And that from this “*stump of Jesse*” (Isa 11:1), “*there shall come forth a shoot...  
 a branch from his roots shall bear fruit.*”

What looks like death and destruction from the outside,  
is actually the cause of the greatest life the world has ever known!

Our humility, the pruning and lopping off of our sinful desires and passions,  
makes way for the fruit that our Lord desires to bear within us.

For this Root of Jesse, this Branch and Shoot is Jesus Christ Himself.  
He is the life that arises from the dead.  
In Him—in His cross—the Tree of Life was chopped down,  
that a new Tree might arise!

“And,” as Isaiah prophesied long ago, “*the Spirit of the Lord rests upon Him.*”  
“*The Spirit of wisdom and understanding;*  
*the Spirit of counsel and might;*  
*the Spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.*” (Isa 11:2)

This new Shoot and Branch—this new Tree delights in the Law of the Lord!  
He does His will day and night.  
He worships the Father without fear and He receives from Him all power and authority.  
He loves His neighbor as Himself; even giving His life for His neighbor.  
He judges not by appearances or hearsay, as the world does, but by righteousness.  
He feeds the hungry with good things and lifts the poor from their sorrow.  
He brings evil to an end so that life would come to all.

In this new Tree everything’s different.  
All the ways of our world are flipped on their heads.  
The lamb no longer fears the wolf, and the leopard has no hunger for the young goat.  
The hunter and the hunted graze about together; and there’s peace.  
The weakest among us—the nursing infants, and those still in their mothers’ wombs—  
have no fear of the deadliest snakes or the selfish confusion of their mothers.  
“*They shall not hurt or destroy in all My holy mountain,*” says the Lord. (Isa 11:9)

So thank God that the man stands with his axe ready, and winnowing fork in his hand—  
thank God that our sin is brought to light, that it might be confessed, and forgiven.

For its only in our dying to self—in our being laid low through confession and absolution—  
*that the new Man should daily emerge and arise to live before God*  
*in righteousness and purity forever.*

This Root of Jesse is what you have been grafted into by grace through faith.  
Let us put off of the old self, and bear fruit in keeping with repentance. (Mt 3:8)

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