Advent Midweek 3

O Come, Branch of Jesse

Isaiah 11:1

Sermon Outline

We’re Praying for the Stump of Jesse’s Tree to Sprout a Descendant Who Will Come as an Ensign and Save Us!

 I. The descendant of Jesse will come and stand as an ensign around which all who rally will be saved.

 II. The descendant of Jesse stands as an ensign of salvation by being lifted up on a cross.

 III. The descendant of Jesse we can be sure stands as an ensign who saves because his resting place is now glorious.

Sermon

“O Christmas tree, O Christmas tree, your branches green delight us.”

The Western world has been delighted with Christmas trees for centuries. Some have said that Martin Luther is the first person to have cut down an evergreen, bring it into the house, and decorate it. Maybe he did or maybe he didn’t. Who knows for sure? But whatever their origin, Christmas trees give us joy.

Actually, the idea of incorporating a tree into the celebration of important events in the story of salvation is much older than Martin Luther. Five hundred years before Luther, Christians in Europe were celebrating Christmas with a Jesse tree.

What’s a Jesse tree, you might wonder? A Jesse tree is a work of art depicting the ancestry of Jesus going back to Jesse, the father of David. It can be of stained glass or carved stone or wood or painted in a manuscript. Often, Jesse is depicted as sleeping peacefully on the ground with a vine or tree growing out of his side.

The tree twists and turns and reaches upward. Sprouting like leaves along the trunk are pictures or carvings of the ancestors of Jesus. We find these ancestors in the genealogies of the Bible. At the top of the tree is a likeness of the Virgin Mary holding Jesus, the Son of God. Or sometimes, baby Jesus is nestled in the cup of a white flower. It’s this artistic picture that gives rise to the beloved Christmas song “Lo, How a Rose E’er Blooming.”

But our focus in this Advent midweek series is not *that* song, but another—“O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” And tonight, it’s the fourth stanza.

O come, Thou Branch of Jesse’s tree,

Free them from Satan’s tyranny

That trust Thy mighty pow’r to save,

And give them vict’ry o’er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel! (*LSB* 357:4)

Now, if we were medieval monks, we’d be singing this stanza Dec 19 during the week before Christmas. But we’re not medieval monks. We’re Lutherans, so we sing it when we please, as we’ve done this evening.

Regardless of when it’s sung, what’s the point of the stanza? As is the rest of the song, it’s a prayer.

We’re Praying for the Stump of Jesse’s Tree

to Sprout a Descendant

Who Will Come as an Ensign and Save Us!

I.

Using Old Testament imagery, we’re praying that this descendant will stand as an ensign around which all God’s people rally. An ensign is a standard, a banner, a flag, or a signal tower. It emboldens those who identify with it. It terrifies every enemy who doesn’t.

Do you remember that photograph from World War II of Marines raising the flag atop Mount Suribachi on the island of Iwo Jima? It’s hugely symbolic and perhaps the most reprinted photograph of all time. It’s just a picture, but it inspired Americans to press on with the fight and win the war.

That’s like the descendant of Jesse, who sprouts from his lifeless stump of a tree when there was no ensign around which to rally. For Isaiah’s audience, the war seemed lost. He’s speaking about a time when the kingdom of David would no longer exist. Assyria would conquer the Northern Kingdom of Israel; 136 years later, the Babylonians would subdue the Southern Kingdom of Judah. Zedekiah would be the last descendant of David to reign as king. He would see his sons killed before his very eyes. Then he would be blinded and taken into captivity. Jerusalem and the temple would be burned and demolished. At that point, figuratively speaking, the flag would be captured and the sword surrendered. Jesse would be no more than a dead stump. It would all be over for him and the kingdom of God.

Or would it be? Not according to Isaiah. “There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse” (11:1). And that shoot from Jesse’s stump “shall stand as a signal for the peoples” (11:10). The peoples are not just Jews, but *all* who rally to the signal, the standard, the banner, the great tree that sprouts from Jesse’s stump. Gathered to the shoot of Jesse, they find protection from their enemies. There, Jew and Gentile become one people of God.

That shoot from Jesse’s stump is, of course, Jesus, born to the Virgin Mary, the espoused wife of Joseph, who was of the house and lineage of David, David’s lineage being the Jesse tree. *All* who rally to the standard of Jesus are saved from mankind’s enemies: sin, death, and the devil.

And I do mean *all.* The inclusion of *all* people is another miracle Isaiah reveals eight hundred years before Christ. *Jew and Gentile* *together* are saved by faith in Jesse’s descendant named Jesus. Through faith in Jesus, *all* people become the one true Israel of God, the Church. In the New Testament, Paul glories that this impossibility has come true. For centuries, there was a wall between Jew and Gentile. Jews were the people of the covenant. Gentiles were the outsiders. But in Christ, all things in heaven and on earth come together under one head (Eph 1:10). That means Jews and Gentiles become one people under the lordship of Jesus. Or to say it in Paul’s own words, “the Gentiles are fellow heirs, members of the same body, and partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus through the Gospel” (Eph 3:6).

All who by faith rally around Christ Jesus, the ensign, the banner, which is this descendant of Jesse’s tree stump, will be saved.

II.

Lutherans love the plain words of Scripture. Something solid. For we know that God is not fuzzy and vague with His words; He tells us exactly how He wants us to hear and believe His words. So when Jesus says of the Lord’s Supper, “This is my body” and “This is my blood,” we believe that’s what it is. The bread we eat and the cup we drink of *are* the body and blood of Christ (Mt 26:26–28). When Jesus says, “Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved,” we take his word for it (Mk 16:16). Believing, baptized people are saved.

So looking literally at Is 11, we see a shoot sprouting up from Jesse’s stump that conquers our enemies and brings peace between God and man and harmony to the whole of creation. We see this shoot becoming a powerful signal or standard or tower to which people from every nation are drawn. What has Jesus done that conquers our enemies, brings peace, and draws together mankind into one people? He has died on the cross! The cross of Jesus is the literal banner and signal to which people from every nation, kindred, and tribe rally. “The royal banners forward go; the cross shows forth redemption’s flow” (*LSB* 455:1).

And Jesus himself even says so. *Twice* he says so. “As Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness, so must the Son of Man be lifted up, that *whoever* believes in him may have eternal life” (Jn 3:14–15).

Jesus is recalling that incident in the Old Testament when the complaining and sinful Israelites, wandering in the wilderness, are attacked by serpents, literally red fiery seraphim, snakes. Moses is commanded to make a bronze effigy of a serpent, nail it to a pole, and hold it up high. All who look to the snake on the pole are saved. In the same way, the Bible says God “made him [Jesus] to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God” (2 Cor 5:21). In other words, Jesus, our righteous Lord, was made sin, nailed to a cross, and lifted up. All who look to him in faith are saved from the serpent [the devil] and death.

The other time Jesus refers to himself being lifted up occurs after he’s been visited by Greeks who’ve come to see him. Says Jesus, “ ‘When I am lifted up from the earth, [I] will draw *all* people to myself.’ *He said this to show by what kind of death he was going to die*” (Jn 12:33, emphasis added). So when Isaiah speaks of the stump of Jesse sprouting and standing as a signal that all men come to, he’s not just referring to the *birth* of Jesus as the end product of a long family tree; he’s also foreseeing his *death* on the cross, the other tree.

III.

But what makes the cross powerful? How do we know it really saves sinners, Jew and Gentile alike, who trust Christ who died there? That brings us to this mysterious phrase at the end of Is 11:10: “his resting place shall be glorious.” What might that mean? To be honest, there’s no consensus among Bible commentators. I looked, and they don’t agree. But let me touch on the usual ways of interpreting that “glorious” resting place.

One possibility is that it refers to the peace of heart, mind, and soul of one who trusts in the cross of Jesus. To know the forgiveness of sins and freedom from bondage to the devil and to have the assurance of eternal life in Christ is truly a glorious resting place. I like that.

Another possibility is that this glorious resting place is that perfect, peaceful, happy, and restored creation where Christ dwells with his Church forever. It’s the new heavens and new earth spoken of by the prophet Isaiah and by John in his Revelation. Frankly, I like that interpretation very much too. And maybe it’s the correct one.

But there’s another way of looking at the glorious resting place of Christ. And this interpretation flows from the understanding of his signal, his banner, being the cross. On the cross, Jesus died for the sins of the world. There, our transgressions were all atoned for. There, God is reconciled to sinners; he’s not angry with us anymore. At the cross, God welcomes and calls us home with open arms, just as in the story of the prodigal, the father welcomes home his once wayward son.

How can we be sure the cross does all this, that it welcomes us home to God? Because the resting place, the tomb of Jesus, is empty! The body of the crucified Jesus was laid lifeless in the tomb. The tomb was sealed and guarded. But on the third day, Easter Sunday, when the friends of Jesus came back to the tomb to finish burying our Lord properly, it was empty. Jesus had risen from the dead! His resurrection shows all the world that sin, death, and the devil are conquered. His resting place, his tomb, once a place of sorrow, hopelessness, and despair, is now a glorious place of victory.

Once again, there’s a difference in the Latin version of “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel” and Rev. John Mason Neale’s translation. In fact, the Latin and the English don’t sound much alike at all. The Latin sticks more closely to the words of Isaiah:

O Root of Jesse,

Standing as an ensign before the peoples,

Before whom all kings are mute,

To whom the nations will do homage,

Come quickly to deliver us.

But there’s no mention at all of that glorious resting place and what it might be. On the other hand, Rev. Neale’s version presumes the empty tomb. Listen carefully:

O come, Thou Branch of Jesse’s tree,

Free them from Satan’s tyranny

That trust Thy mighty power to save,

And give them vict’ry o’er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel

Shall come to thee, O Israel! (*LSB* 357:4)

Victory over the grave. How? Surely it must be through the cross and the tomb of Jesus, his resting place, made glorious because it is empty!

Root of Jesse, Lord Jesus, come quickly, we pray. Gather us all to the royal banner of your cross, that we might be delivered from all our sins and enemies and rejoice in your glorious resting place. In your name we pray. Amen.