

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together;

and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,

and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy

on all my holy mountain;

for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord

as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples;

the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the axe is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing-floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Sermon: Heirloom Cultivars

Years ago I had a friend who made a pilgrimage each summer half way up the coast of Maine to the small town of Brooksville. I say it was a pilgrimage because he went there to visit the home of Scott and Helen Nearing, a couple who had left the city life behind and retreated to the country as 20th century homesteaders. They went first to Vermont in 1932 and later to Maine in 1952. Through their writing they preached a gospel of back to the land self-sufficiency combined with civic engagement. Probably their best known books were "Living the Good Life" and the "Maple Sugar Book"

One year when my friend returned from the Nearings he brought with him this strange looking plant – an Egyptian onion. I had never seen this kind of onion but, as the name implies, I was led to understand it had roots in ancient times. At the time you would have been hard put to find the Egyptian onion in many gardens, although I think it's quite a bit more popular now. This past summer I saw it in the garden of the Heifer Farm where our Mission Trip spent a week – they called it a walking onion because of its ingenious method of propagation: the plant grows a tall center stalk with a bulb at the top. When the weight of the bulb gets to a certain point it causes the stalk to fall over placing the bulb a foot or more away. The top bulb then roots in the ground and so the plant spreads - if left alone it will literally walk right across your garden.

The Nearings had cultivated this plant because it was hardy, self-sustaining, and packed a solid taste punch in a small package. It was also bountiful and a great gift for anyone who came to help them in their garden. Finally, I think part of the appeal was that the Egyptian Onion was an heirloom cultivar.

A cultivar is a any variety of a plant that has been deliberately selected for specific desirable characteristics like color, flower, yeild, disease resistance, shape or taste. When planted and cared for properly, the plants of a particular cultivar retain their special characteristics.

An heirloom cultivar is a plant that was grown by our ancestors but over time was pushed aside and abandoned in favor of modern varieties – often because the modern variety was better suited to large

scale agriculture, marketing and distribution. Modern varieties tend to be dependent on fertilizer and pesticides and engineered for longer shelf life, not for taste.

Not that long ago it was unusual to find heirloom cultivars in your average garden and difficult to find seeds or stock if you wanted to grow the tomatoes you remembered from your grandmother. Now the collection, preservation, and distribution of heirloom seed and stock is a global movement – in part from an awareness the importance of maintaining biodiversity and in part from a desire for food choices that are regional, seasonal, and offer a wide range of color, taste, texture, and nourishment.

What I like about heirloom cultivars as a stepping off point for a sermon, especially during Advent, is the element of recovering something lost or forgotten and appreciating the value of it, bringing it back to life, cultivating and sharing it so that it thrives, spreads, and nourishes the community.

I think that is very much in keeping with the prophecy of Isaiah we read this morning;

A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,

and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

That's probably a good English translation from the Hebrew, but back when most people read their Bible in Latin, the words were given a slightly different cast. And there shall come forth a rod out of the root of Jesse, and a flower shall rise up out of his root.

From this we get the hymn: Lo, how a Rose e'er blooming from tender stem hath sprung! Of Jesse's lineage coming, as men of old have sung. It came, a floweret bright, amid the cold of winter, When half spent was the night.

Two things are going on here – a historical narrative of a family tree cut down to the ground and left for dead and the seasonal narrative of nights that grow longer and longer until we arrive at the longest and darkest night of the year. In that darkness, from that devastated root, new life springs up.

If you were to travel to the great cathedrals of Europe you could see magnificent stained glass windows and paintings that took this prophecy from Isaiah and visualized a many branched tree that grows from

Jesse, the grandson of Ruth and Boaz and the father of King David. The Jesse Tree came to represent all the of prophets and ancestors of Jesus, the heritage, the faithful companions, the great crowd of witnesses as Paul wrote, who lived by the faith that God was preparing a better homeland for the dwelling place of their children and the generations to follow.

Paul counted it a privilege to live in the time when the words of such prophecy were fulfilled. The family of faith was at a low point, cut down to nothing, and yet just at the darkest moment the root sprouted and flowered in the person of Jesus Christ.

Tradition says that Jesus was a carpenter, but he often uses the language of a farmer to paint a picture of the meaning of his work, the reasons his words are sometimes accepted and other times rejected, and even the relationship he has with his disciples and all future generations who will come to believe in his Gospel.

Jesus compares those who hear his words to the various soils the farmer encounters when sowing his seed: there is rocky soil and shallow soil, there is soil choked with thorns – none of these are receptive to the Gospel. But then there is the good soil, and a single seed in good soil can produce a hundredfold yield of grain. Let those who have ears, he said, let them listen.

Jesus speaks about knowing who is true and who is false in terms of the consistency of a cultivar in yielding its characteristic fruits: Are grapes gathered from thorns, or figs from thistles? In the same way, every good tree bears good fruit: You will know them by their fruits.

And, as we are familiar with from our communion service, Jesus speaks of his relationship with the disciples in terms of a vine and its branches: "I am the true vine, and my Father is the vinegrower.

My friend came back from his pilgrimage to Maine with an Egyptian onion, a beautiful and bountiful heirloom cultivar. In this season of Advent we make our pilgrimage towards Bethlehem, where a shoot shall come from the stock of Jesse, new life from old roots, life grounded in love bearing fruits of peace, joy, and hope. I am the vine, you are the branches says the Lord; abide in me and I will abide in you.