

APPRECIATING OUR ROOTS

December 8, 2019

Advent 2

[Isaiah 11:1-10](#)

[Matthew 3:1-12](#)

(prayer)

If you have been around the north entrance to the church (by the office) in the last few weeks, you may have noticed the little yellow utility flags. I'm not sure if they are telling us about the gas or power lines, but certainly something is just below the surface that you don't want to stick a shovel through.

When they first appeared in late October or early November, I had no idea *why* they were there. I was not aware of any digging work planned for the church yard.

I really don't mind being ignorant about such things. I continue to take comfort in a comment I heard, many years ago, at a church stewardship event with [Kennon Callahan](#): *If you know everything that is going on in your church, not enough is going on.*

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I did eventually learn that the City of Leduc is planning on adding a pedestrian sidewalk along the north boundary of the church property. Our little stretch of 47th Avenue is the only portion between the train tracks and the theatre with no sidewalk on this side of the street.

Long over due.

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When this project was reported to the church council last month, the discussion included wanting to safeguard the century-old willow tree on the corner of the church yard. The trunk and branches of the tree itself are not really in the way of any sidewalk construction, but its roots must stretch out half a block or more in all directions.

Members of the council want to ensure that (as the ground is prepared for the cement) that the crews don't indiscriminately bust through some of that old tree's valuable roots, which can be (surprisingly) close to the surface.

With the arrival of winter temps, the work won't happen until the spring at this point. But, even winter snow can't change what lies below the surface.

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It is important that all of us, when we are observing things around us, particularly when we are thinking about people, [that] we remain mindful that there are significant aspects of life that may not be easily visible.

We are more than what we appear. Each of us has a lot going on below the surface: things that (for better or worse) are foundational to who we are.

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It is good advice for everyone to take:
be careful when making judgments about someone else because, we don't know their whole story.

We don't know how their day has gone so far.

We don't know what weighs on their heart and mind.

If we are unnecessarily harsh or critical, we could be compounding an already difficult experience. We could, unwittingly, be someone's last straw.

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This advice is equally as applicable to strangers we encounter and people we believe that we

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know well.

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Even national leaders at international conferences need to watch what they are gossiping about. You never know: a [hot mic](#) might expose your quips and another leader can get their feelings hurt and want to go home early.

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Kidding aside, the truth is that there are times that - for each of us - (below the surface) we are dealing with some serious s**t that we mask around even some of our closest companions.

Sometimes, we don't feel up to sharing our shadow sides. Sometimes, the issues are embarrassing or we fear could be fodder for unwanted judgment or advice. And sometimes, we just don't want to burden others with our problems.

Maybe this happens more often with introverts, but even those who are more outgoing still keep a few things in the pockets.

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Like the church's *laurel leaf willow tree*, we can appear strong and sturdy, but can be extremely vulnerable just below the surface.

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Today's scripture readings for this second Sunday of Advent encourage us to be mindful of our roots. Now, while that certainty speaks to appreciating how we are connected to all that has come before us, I also like to think of *appreciating our roots* as accepting our hidden vulnerabilities that are also part of who we are.

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As the people of Judah worried about their future (given the reality of empires expanding toward them from the northeast), the prophet spoke words of *a hope to come* by reminding them of a nostalgic past.

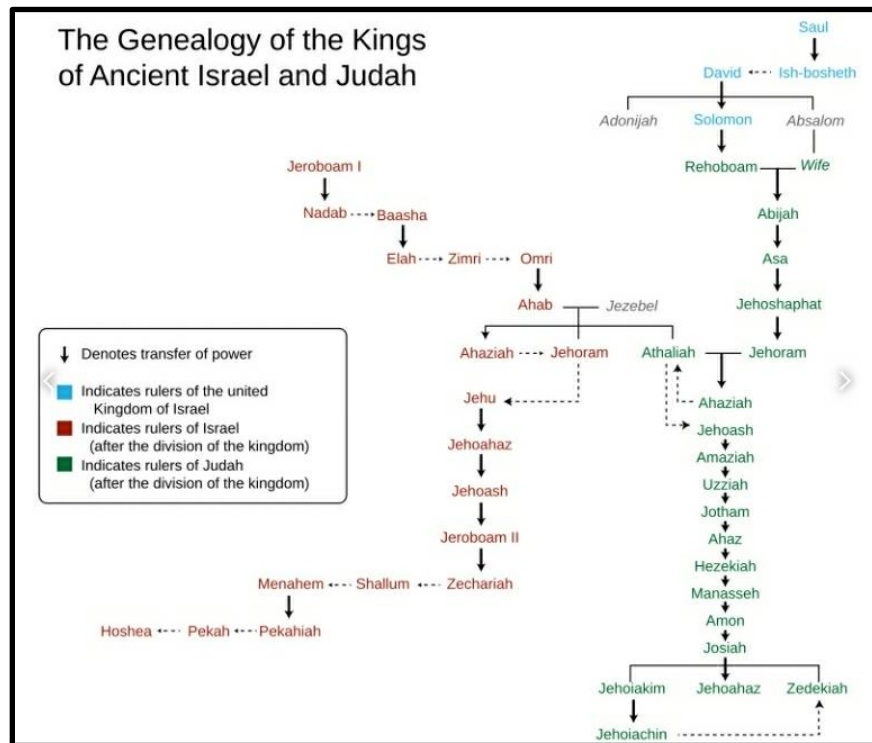
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King David was long revered (among the Hebrew people) as the example of successful leadership. David was only Israel's second-ever king. He built and established Jerusalem as a new centre of national identity. David dedicated the highest hilltop in the city as a finally settled location for the sacred tabernacle. This nomadic tent had moved around with the people as a worship place and house for the Ark of (God's) Covenant since the time of Moses. David's son and successor, king Solomon would replace the tent tabernacle when he built the first Hebrew temple out of stone on Mount Zion a generation later.

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By the time spoken of in the Isaiah reading today, David's grand kingdom was a shadow of its former self. After Solomon's death there had been a split between north and south resulting in two separate Hebrew kingdoms, each with their own line of kings.

During the time of the Assyrian Empire, the Northern kingdom was especially vulnerable. History would record that northern Israel's capital (Samaria) was overrun by Assyria in 720BCE. That marked the end of an independent northern kingdom. While the [south](#) endured for about 135 more years (including the time into which the first part of Isaiah was written), the [north's](#) line of kings ends with [King Hoshea](#) in the late 8th century, before Jesus' time.



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And yet, in (southern) Judah at least, the people longed for a return to the days of King David.

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It is into that nostalgic hope that the prophet speaks the words we read today: *A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.*

Jesse was David's father.

Isaiah is pointing to a future rooted to the glories of davidic rule.

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The image created by the prophet's words is idealic, hyperbolic: even the natural predatory instincts of wild and domesticated animals will reflect the promised peace: *The wolf shall live with the lamb... The nursing child shall play over the [snake's] hole.*

Last week, we read from Isaiah chapter six: that *swords would be beat into plowshares and nations shall not learn war anymore.*

Today's reading is a further description of that promise.

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Today, in this imagined future, the prophet sees no need for a warrior-king. In fact, with no need to lead the nation into battle, even *a little child could lead them.*

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Of course, Isaiah did not actually believe that carnivorous animals would become vegetarian, or that asps would not defend their dens, or that children could run governments.

This is not a literal blueprint of the future... but a metaphor for how this hoped-for peace should feel.

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What would true peace feel like?

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Imagine how it would feel to not having to worry that a fox would get in the hen house, or that a

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curious toddler might be seen as a threat to a scorpion .

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As I read Isaiah 11, it reads less about a return to a david-like past, but a desire for a future when the people can set aside the worries over the dangers that threaten peaceable living.

Even in David's time, there was war and worry.

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David was far from a perfect king, or person for that matter. Remember, he set himself up with a future wife (whom he'd already impregnated) by sending her soldier-husband to the frontlines where he would surely die a glorious death in service of his king.

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Appreciating the roots of Jesse's tree, doesn't include claiming *everything* as something we want to repeat.

Appreciating our roots includes coming to terms with our past (and our old and new vulnerabilities)... then setting out on a better future.

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When John, the son of Zechariah, preached by the Jordan River, he was a memorable sight to behold. He was an authentic man of the wilderness, dressing strangely and subsisting on insects and honey he took from wild bee hives. The text doesn't go into a more detailed physical description, but John the Baptist is usually depicted with unkempt hair and a scraggly beard. Probably not a bad guess for a guy who apparently didn't make it into town very often.

Now, some people may have made the journey into the valley just to see how John looked, but the gospels all imply that it was what John had to say that drew people from all over Judea.

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John's go-to sermon was to invite people to look at how their life and faith was rooted. He called for people to appreciate a life grounded in God and the hope of God's realm... *Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.*

As a symbol of dying to an old way of living and being born into new life, John had people go through the ritual of going under the river's water and emerging, renewed and refreshed.

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The baptism could have deep meaning for the participants, but John was quick to point out that it was really people's willingness to truly re-focus their lives that was more important.

John had no fears of highlighting the hypocrisy of some of the baptism pilgrims. It was not going to be good enough to repent with words: they needed to bear fruit worthy of repentance moving forward.

There is another orchard metaphor. Repentance is a re-rooting of one's life and faith. But the roots are there to feed the tree above the surface. Good and healthy roots will be shown in the fruit that eventually results.

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John wants his pilgrims to see their baptisms *not* as a culmination of their faith, but as a new beginning.

They are see themselves as coming through the water as a changed person, who will live in a new way.

The symbolism harkens back to Moses leading the Israelites through the Red Sea to a new and open life free from the oppression of the past.

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Even on the other side of the waters, the Israelites never forgot their roots that included their history of slavery and wandering. And walking through the waters did not mean that the future was not without its challenges.

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It is important for each of us to be aware of where our roots are and how they are feeding the bigger picture of our lives.

There may be roots that no longer feed us in good and meaningful ways: Regret, Resentment.

Some roots inhibit the peace-full life we desire. And so, like John the Baptist said, we set those aside. And dig down deeper with the roots that can feed us and bear fruit.

The fruit of our renewed focus on life and faith, not only feeds us, but feeds others as well.

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We are individual creatures of God and each of us deserves hope and peace to shine in our lives. And... we are part of something bigger than ourselves.

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As we move through this advent season (halfway point today), let us appreciate the roots of the Christmas we are journeying towards... especially the vulnerable roots of Christmas: Jesus as utterly dependant child: God incarnate, but fully human.

Don't buy the misleading verse in Away in a Manger ("no crying he makes" - yeah, right); full humanity is God willing to be vulnerable to truly be in the world.

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Christmas is about new birth.

John viewed baptism as a new birth. And with new birth comes vulnerability and interdependence.

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There are lots of secular Xmas traditions. Most are harmless and fun, so enjoy them. Hey, let's admit that virtually all of our common traditions and practices of Xmas have non-christian roots... including the very day of the year we celebrate Jesus' birth (but that will have to be a topic for another day).

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But for today, let us not forget to appreciate our first and most *basic and true* roots of this season... the strong and the tender roots of a divine humanity breathing its first vulnerable breaths. And... the promise of bearing faithful fruit in a peaceful future.

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Let us pray:

Open us, O God, to your unfolding vision. And use us as channels of your peace. Amen.

#28VU "Herald! Sound the Note of Gladness"

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