

## The Stump of Jesse

- 2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Lent
- December 4, 2016
- Stephen V. Sundborg, S.J.

Welcome to Advent and to this Advent Mass for the Alumni and friends of Seattle University in this our 125<sup>th</sup> year. In preparing this homily I realized how important tradition is to me. Our readings for this Sunday open with Isaiah:

On that day a shoot shall sprout  
from the stump of Jesse,  
and from his roots a bud  
shall blossom.

A shoot from a stump and a blossom from a bud from roots. Our scriptures continue with Paul:

Whatever was written previously  
was written for our instruction,  
that by endurance and by the encouragement  
of the scriptures  
we might have hope.

From the witness of the past, endurance; and from the ancient scriptures, encouragement and hope. And they build to the Gospel:

John the Baptist appeared, preaching in  
the desert of Judea and saying, "Repent,  
for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!"  
(He was) "A voice of one crying out in the desert,  
'Prepare the way of the Lord, make  
straight his paths.'"

A prophet bridging the old and the new, preparing the way for Christ, the Lord. Each of our readings calls us to look to the past, to roots, to a stump, to the scriptures of old, to a prophet in the desert to see how our faith today blossoms from them and gives hope for the future. They move from tradition, to today, to tomorrow.

This most unusual Advent wreath is indeed a stump, the stump of a Douglas Fir, washed up after drifting in the ocean, dried out, upturned with roots in the air bearing our Advent candles. "A shoot shall sprout from the stump of Jesse." From Jesse shall come King David, and from King David shall come Jesus; and from Jesus shall come we; and from us shall come new Christians.

Have you ever thought about your faith tree; not just your family tree, but your faith tree? Somehow from Jesus, who himself was nourished from the stump of Jesse, and from the first disciples over centuries and millennia there has been a living shoot of faith passed on from

believers, to martyrs, to ancient Christian families, to monks, to theologians, to converted barbarians, to devout peasants, to travelling merchants, to missionaries, to humble ancestors, nuns, priests, teachers and professors, to you believing, to you with faith. If faith got to you it had to have come a very long and branching way from the shoot that sprouted from the stump of Jesse, across 100 or so generations, always coming alive somehow, even though it may have seemed dead, or withered, or burnt, or fruitless. If you have faith it has come by way of the miracle of being passed along from the long past, has been kept alive, has come by way of tradition. In this sense all Christians are necessarily traditionalists and thankfully so because without tradition, without this passing on of faith, they could not believe today or pass on the living faith and bear the fruit of Christians tomorrow. Tradition, today, tomorrow all from the stump of Jesse.

I have been thinking so much about the 125-year history of our university. I am humbled and amazed by it. Why? It, too, is a tree of faith, started like a tender shoot from a stump: two Jesuits on this newly cleared hilltop. The shoot was faith; the shoot was Catholic education; the shoot was Jesuit boldness and persistence. A few high school boys, a couple college-age Catholic young men, more Jesuits, no women at first, branching out to Seattle Prep then being grafted back here on First Hill, nearly dead a couple of times, rescued, renewed life, women students, returning GIs, lay professors, blossoming growth, fruitful, today, this chapel, you alumni and friends, tomorrow's students. I am amazed at the sturdiness, the toughness of tradition when it is based on faith. When we realize what is in our hands as a university, we are deeply humbled, and we have hope.

Who of us has not reflected on the tradition and the common purpose of our nation in these months? We sometimes forget how deeply our nation was founded on faith, on religion, as one nation under God and we ask what will be the faith foundation of American's future. At Thanksgiving we are reminded of this by the 50 pilgrims of the 110 who came over on the Mayflower, who survived the first winter and made it to the Thanksgiving harvest. There, too, is a shoot sprouting from the stump of Jesse. It was Abraham Lincoln who made Thanksgiving a regular national holiday. Listen to his words from October 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1863, in the midst of the Civil War, and listen for the living faith flowing through the tree of faith of our nation.

I do therefore invite my fellow citizens in every part of the United States, and also those who are at sea and those who are sojourning in foreign lands, to set apart and observe the last Thursday of November next, as a day of Thanksgiving and Praise to our beneficent Father who dwelleth in the Heavens. And I recommend to them that while offering up the ascriptions justly due to Him for such singular deliverances and blessings, they do also, with humble penitence for our national perverseness and disobedience, commend to His tender care all those who have become widows, orphans, mourners or sufferers in the lamentable civil strife in which we are unavoidably engaged, and fervently implore the interposition of the Almighty Hand to heal the wounds of the nation and to restore it as soon as may be consistent with the Divine purposes to the full enjoyment of peace, harmony, tranquillity and Union.

Of course, the tree of faith of our nation is not the tree of one faith, but of many, but they are planted and grow from a common ground and have a common purpose and flowing through the

sacrifices and commitments and fellowship of our history. Many new branches, we as migrants, have been grafted onto this America tree rooted in a common ground, born from and always renewed by faith. Our tree is as wild as this upturned stump, but we pray that it be one.

Finally, let's come closer to home, to ourselves, to our families, to this year and to this Advent. As I think back over the year I find, I know, and I love particular people who have given life to my faith. I think especially of those who have died: relatives, friends, a dozen Jesuits, teachers, several university colleagues, mentors, a few students, dear dear people, many people of faith. Perhaps you would like to do the same, to review just this one year since last Advent. Who do you find, honor, miss, love, thank for making your faith more alive today because of their lives of faith? How are they vital to your tree of faith today; how are they a shoot that sprouts from a stump, a bud that blossoms in you, an encouragement to hope, a voice in the desert preparing you to receive the Lord with faith deepened and renewed? We don't need to go too far for this personal source of faith for us and this new hope. Those who have died may seem dead, but they are not; nor in themselves and not in our faith. They are the stump that only seems dead. Tradition, today, tomorrow all from the stump of Jesse.

Thank you Isiaah, Paul, John the Baptist, ancestors in faith, faithful servants of our 125 year history, American forebears, family and friends for the living faith you have pass on and renewed in us. In this Advent we thank you and in hope we look forward to the coming of the Lord to us and to those to whom we hope to pass on the faith.