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St. Timothy's Episcopal Church
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Advent 2, Year "A" [RCL]: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72: 1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13,
Matthew 3:1-12

Title: Hosting Christ Within us

Everything changes and nothing changes. We all know that phrase.

Some would say that I am easily impressed. Maybe so, but much of the technology of today would have, and indeed was called 'science fiction' for much of my lifetime. Dick Tracy of the comic strip by the same name wore a wristwatch that doubled as a phone, camera, and a video receiver. Now you can buy one.

Now days, you can order something from the Amazon store in the morning and never having left your house, have it in your hands a few hours later compliments of a little helicopter called a drone. A delivery drone is about the size of a shoe box, it directs itself by GPS, and delivers your package to your house. The only thing it seems to not do is ring your door bell, but I'm sure that is coming.

How about this: our cars now parallel park themselves. Look Ma, no hands.

We could all name many more examples of technology we probably thought we would never see.

Indeed, some things change and these days, technological changes are occurring so fast we can hardly keep up. Technology changes our lives and it changes the way we understand and interact with the world about us.

On the other hand, our understanding of something as basic and fundamental as plant physiology – that is to say our understanding of plant reproduction and growth cycles, not to mention plant life's irreplaceable status as our primary food source is essentially the same as it was in so called Bible times. Some things never

change. This is why agricultural metaphors still work for us. Today's texts are replete with such metaphors.

For example, we find in our lesson this morning from the Book of Isaiah a strange image for the coming Messiah: "A shoot (says the prophet) shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots." Now picture what this looks like. You've seen it before. A tree gets chopped down to a stump, and a little shoot starts growing out of it at some point. These little shoots that grow out of stumps are actually known by the unflattering name "suckers." I have discovered that there are all kinds of remedies on the Internet for how to seal off a stump and prevent it from giving out new shoots of life. And I'm told that managing these little suckers can be an aspect of landscape management.

Well, with all this said, Israel's enemies had tried every way they knew to seal off the stump of Jesse that was the "root" of the throne of King David. Israel's enemies had waged war against them, they had enslaved them, they had put them in prison, they had even tried starving them out. Jesus' ancestors suffered all this and more. And yet, somehow, there is still life stirring in this burnt-out old stump of a nation.

The survival of the nation of Israel, the life remaining in that nation was and is both a reality as well as a metaphor for the life-enhancing nature of Creator God and the life-giving nature of the second person of the Trinity – Jesus. And so when we think about it, all of this imagery having to do with managing difficult or unwanted plants is an odd way to describe Jesus. After all, we understand Jesus to be the new "King" of Israel; yet, he is described as a fragile branch growing out of an unsightly old stump. Not a very triumphant or powerful image is it? But that's what Advent is all about. It is about coming to terms with the profound knowledge that God chose to come to Earth in such a vulnerable state: a defenseless human baby – and to come to such a rag-tag bunch of people. Even Jesus - it turns out had rascals, and scoundrels, and even harlots in his genealogical closet.

And neither a baby nor a wee branch growing out of a stump is going to last long against determined enemies. But that is also part of reorienting our mindset during Advent. The angel says to the shepherds, "Be not afraid." That is what lies behind the courage to let Jesus be born as a helpless baby, the little shoot out of the stump that could be cut down at any moment. It is God's way of saying we have entered a new era of peace. God's kingdom is here, or at least has been *initiated* in the birth of the Christ-child.

Another interesting thing about branches on trees is that they grow right on the edge. Very little of the growth of a tree happens internally, down in the trunk. New cells are produced right at the very edge and build outward -- fragile but brave.

Likewise, we might ask: What are the edges of our lives that need our attention to really start growing? What are the parts of our lives that feel unfinished and vulnerable, and/or that we are maybe afraid to expose to the light? The Gospel invites us to internalize the message of the Angels of Peace, to hear and respond to the injunction to not be afraid in order to let that new growth within ourselves have half a fighting chance.

We are moving into winter and though we've had a few warm days as of late, cold weather will soon be settling in for a season. And so it might feel a little strange to be talking about the fragile budding growth of new tree branches. But this too is an important sign. The new life and new growth that Jesus brings does not always arrive in the obvious places or obvious times. We need to look for and to recognize opportunities for birth and growth even in the cold, forgotten, frosty and inhospitable places of our lives as well.

And the trials we experience – dare I call them the storms of life that come our way – are also important to our new growth: Back in the '90s you may recall there was a project called Biodome. This was an effort to create a totally self-contained biological environment, a mini-Earth if you will sealed away from the outside world. Some of it was successful, but one of the most baffling disappointments was the trees. They had all the sunlight, water, and nutrients they needed. But nevertheless, as they grew, they just couldn't seem to be able to stand up straight. They flopped over on the ground, weak and limp. The scientists finally realized one vital ingredient of the outside world they had forgotten to include in the Biodome environment. That ingredient was wind. It turns out that in nature, the wind blows and causes tiny microcracks in the trunk and branches of trees. Trees rely on this trauma for their growth. Standing straight to the wind, breaking a little but rebuilding at the same time, is what helps them grow stronger. And so it also turns out that the trials and traumas in our lives might likewise be as essential to our growth.

Finally, turning for a moment to our friend John the Baptist, he descends like a furious storm in our gospel this morning. He arrives with locusts and vipers and axes and fire. We might be forgiven were we to ask: How does this warlike message of the wrath to come square with the promised peace of the wolf lying down with the lamb?

Remember the image we began with this morning of the shoot growing up out of the stump? Take a step back and consider how that came about. A tree had to be

chopped down to a stump in order for the new shoot to grow up out of it. And so John the Baptist says, “Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees.” John is the very personification of that message. He has arrived to shock us out of our complacency, to call us to chop down and root out all the old habits of greed, shame, and selfishness and anything else that and is affecting our spiritual health.

Advent is the beginning of the new church year, and it is a time to begin with a fresh, clean slate. We are told by John the Baptist to “bear fruit worthy of repentance.” All the old condemnations of ourselves and others are to be chopped down and thrown away, making room for the new shoot of Jesse to take root and to grow up within. This, as it turns out, is how we prepare the way of the Lord. John the Baptist is not preaching a message of condemnation, but rather one of liberation, of freedom from the thick, choking overgrowth of a past that has seemingly trapped us in places of darkness and maybe in something like despair.

But for all the ferocious strength of John’s message it is intermingled with the refreshing waters of baptism. Even as he pours down the fire of his words, he also pours out the gentle stream of water on the heads of the inquirers and seekers at the River Jordan, blessing them with new hope and renewal of life.

In this season of Advent, this season of expectation and possibility, the spirit of the coming Christ is looking for fertile ground in which to prosper, a new shoot out of the old stump. Isaiah proclaims that “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.”

We can make ourselves that dwelling place, made glorious and new by Christ’s presence. This Advent, let us dedicate ourselves to hosting the coming Christ within us such that we might find ourselves manifesting grace in completely new ways – ways that we never expected -- newborn shoots of life stretching up and out and bringing with it new and gloriously good fruit which is part and parcel of our new selves and the changes that we seek and embrace in our lives.

Amen.