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Isaiah 55:8-13; 1 Corinthians 1:20-25
“*O Come, Emmanuel* – Come, O Root of Jesse”
Year B – Advent Midweek 2
December 9, 2020

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God the Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. **Amen.**

Back in the early part of Israel’s history, after they had entered the Promised Land, but before they had entirely defeated their enemies, they were led by God not by a king, but through his appointed prophets and judges. It was understood that God was their King, and he would be faithful to lead them in every way.

But then, there came a day when the Israelites demanded to have an earthly king, a flesh and blood king, just like all the other nations. Samuel had been leading Israel at this time as a prophet, and he sadly brought this request before God. And God said to Samuel, “Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them” (1 Samuel 8:7).

But that’s not all God had to say. Through Samuel, God warned his people. Having an earthly king was not going to be everything they thought it would be. A king would take their sons and daughters into his service. He would take their best crops and livestock for himself. And they would have to do whatever the king says. But the people refused to listen to God, and they still demanded a king. And so God permitted it, and he chose for them Saul.

Now, for a while, things were okay with Saul. But in time, God’s warning came true. And what’s more, King Saul was not faithful, and so God took the kingdom away from him. Saul’s own son would not be king either. Instead, God gave Israel a new king, a shepherd boy from Bethlehem named David, the youngest son of Jesse, his father.

David was anointed by Samuel to be king, and he first served in Saul’s house, leading troops into battle, gathering fame and a good reputation, until the day he eventually wore the crown himself. And David was a faithful king, he was a man after God’s own heart. So, God gave David rest from his enemies and promised that one of David’s own descendants, a Son of David, would rule over the house of Israel for all eternity.

Now, David’s son Solomon would not be that forever king. Solomon was great and wise, and so wealthy that, during his reign, silver was said to be as common in Jerusalem as stone. He built the beautiful temple in Jerusalem that housed the ark of God. But eventually, even Solomon strayed from the faith and began to follow the false gods of his many wives. It was under the reign of Solomon’s son, Rehoboam, who ruled as a tyrant, that Israel was divided into two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judah in the south.

And although some kings of David’s royal line were faithful, many were not. And the worse thing they could possibly do, they did, which was to turn away from the worship of the true God and instead worship idols of false gods. And over time, both Israel and Judah fell captive to their enemies and the people were taken away into exile. The family tree of Jesse, the once-proud royal line of David, was cut down, chopped at the roots, and was left nothing more than a ruined stump.

But what about that promise God made to David? Well, in the midst of this ruin and exile, God, through the prophet Isaiah, gave his people a word of hope. A living shoot, Isaiah said, a growing, fruit-bearing branch would come forth from that stump of Jesse. A source of life where there was previously only death. And God’s Spirit would rest on this new and fruitful Son. This branch, unlike Saul and all the other kings, would rule justly in righteousness. This living,

fruitful king would uphold the meek and the oppressed and—with a breath—destroy the wicked. This was God’s promise of a King and a kingdom given to a people who otherwise had no hope. This was a word of life in the midst of a people who had known only death.

Today, like the people of Israel, we so often go our own way and end up rejecting the rule of God in our lives. We don’t usually demand a king to reign over us. But instead, we want to be king, we want to rule our own lives, we want to hold sovereign power over our own decisions. We so often do not want the will and Word of God to rule our lives. We want to be in charge.

And while we may not bow down and worship wooden blocks and carved idols, we do bow down to idols of a different kind—the false idols of money, or possessions, or sports, or good health, or power. Israel wanted to be like the world around them when they demanded a king. And we so often find ourselves acting, thinking, and speaking like the world around us when we demand what we want. But all it does is lead us to ruin and death. Apart from God, we are nothing but a tree cut down, chopped at the roots, and left nothing more than a ruined stump.

But God’s merciful promise to Israel is a promise for us, as well. Advent is a season of preparation and a season of repentance. We acknowledge our sin before God and confess our need for his promised Savior. We also look toward the fruitful Branch who was born among us in Bethlehem.

This living Branch of Jesse, who is also the Root of Jesse, Jesse’s source of life, is our source of life, too. This righteous Branch of David’s family tree brought hope and salvation to Israel, and not only to Israel, but to all the nations, the Gentiles, you and me, those who are not descended from the family of Abraham. This living Branch brings hope to the entire world.

The apostle Paul wrote in our Epistle Reading, “‘The root of Jesse will come, even he who arises to rule the Gentiles; in him will the Gentiles hope.’ May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit you may *abound in hope*” (Romans 15:12-13).

This and every season of Advent is filled with hope. The living Branch of David’s family tree arrived as the hope of all people. And like a new branch growing out of a dead stump, he brings life where there was only death. He brings forgiveness where there was only sin. He brings salvation where there was only captivity.

This Branch is given a name in Scripture; today after our Gospel Reading we spoke these words: “Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch. This is the name by which He will be called: The Lord Is Our Righteousness” (Jeremiah 23:5a, 6b). Although, we know him better by the name that was given to Mary and Joseph by the angels, a name that means “The Lord saves”: “You shall call his name Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins” (Matthew 1:21).

Today, we call upon the name of Jesus to save us, and look to him, who is the Root of Jesse and the Son of David, for our forgiveness, life, and salvation. In Jesus’ name. **Amen.**

And now may the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. **Amen.**

(This sermon adapted from the *Creative Communications* materials for the series, *O Come, Emmanuel*, 2020.)