

It's All About the Fruit  
Isaiah 11:1-9, Matthew 3:1-12  
The First United Presbyterian Church of Crafton Heights  
December 9, 2007  
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This morning, we continue to read some of the “classic” Advent Scriptures. Each year at this time, the church turns to the prophecies of Isaiah and some of the other key figures in the Old Testament as well as to the accounts of John the Baptist as we re-shape and re-form ourselves as people who are getting ready for the coming of God’s Kingdom.

And in reading today’s scriptures, we are reminded of the fact that our world has changed a great deal in the past two or three thousand years. The accounts that are written are rooted in an agricultural society. What do we know about trees? How many shepherds do you know? Some of the key points in these scriptures may be lost on us because we don’t know now what “everybody knew” back in the day.

For instance, this whole bit about a shoot coming forth from the stump of Jesse. Yikes! What’s that about?

Isaiah is talking about the family of King David. David’s father was Jesse. And he’s comparing this family to an olive tree. Olive trees were (and are) big business in Israel. And here’s what “everybody knew”: if you had an olive tree that wasn’t producing fruit properly, perhaps due to a disease or a fungus, then you might prune it way back. Cut off any of the wood that looked dead, and burn it so as to destroy the pathogen. And maybe, if you had a healthy tree nearby, you would even take a cutting from the healthy tree and graft it onto the sickly tree – literally pasting a branch from one tree onto another one. But if the tree was too far gone for mere pruning or even grafting, then the only thing left was to remove the entire tree, trunk and all, and wait for the roots to produce new shoots. When you nourished the roots and tended the shoots, you’d have fruit the way it was supposed to be.

And here in Isaiah 11, we see a description of the leadership of God’s people. There’s something rotten, the prophet says, and so the whole of the tree will be chopped down and the leadership that grows up will be reflective of God’s creational intent. How do we know that? Because of the illustrations that follow: the things that are happening under this coming leader look a whole lot like things that were happening in the garden of Eden, right? The world is at peace with itself. Things are right.

The passage from Matthew is also rooted (pun intended) in this idea of pruning and removing the dead wood. Only here, John is challenging the current religious leadership of his day. He is in the desert baptizing people for the forgiveness of their sin, and it’s causing quite a stir. In fact, the more people who go to see him, the more people who *want* to go to see him. And so some of the religious leaders decide that it wouldn’t be bad for their images to go on down to

the desert and take a little splash.

But here's the thing: the Jews didn't really, by and large, practice baptism. Some small groups required it, and gentiles who were converting to Judaism underwent baptism, but mostly it didn't happen. So John is calling out these leaders who are more interested in being seen at the baptismal pool than they are in actually getting baptized.

This week, as I was thinking about an illustration that would make sense here, I thought about all the trashy "celebrities" who record gospel or holiday CD's as a means of making a little money and cashing in on a fad. Try this one on – maybe John was saying that the Pharisees getting baptized was about as likely as Don Imus releasing a "Christmas Favorites" CD. Or "Paris Hilton Sings the Great Songs of Faith." Not to say that it couldn't happen...but at this point, it looks like it'd be a stretch, right?

The Advent Scriptures point to the fact that it's easy to say we believe. Anyone can get in line and get splashed, or talk about how much we want God's rule to come to earth. But the question that both Isaiah and John ask us is simply this: are we bearing fruit? Do our lives look the way that God intends them to look? Are the things that come out of our lives in line with the purposes of God for us?

Let me ask that question again, because it's huge. Do our lives look the way that God intends them to look? Are the things that come out of your life in line with the purposes of God for you?

As you think about those questions, let me offer you three stories that have to do with fruit. They are parables. And just as John and Isaiah made references to the land and the people around them, each of these stories has something to do with fruit in Crafton Heights. It's all local. And I should say that one of them comes with what I'll call the "Steve Lignos caveat": you've heard it before.

Story number one: I bought an apple tree in 1994 and planted it in the front yard of my home. It was advertised as being able to bear fruit within one, or at most two years. Mine? Nothing after three. After four years, I called the company that sold me the tree. The first question they asked was, "Well, have you pruned your tree?" Have I pruned my tree? What kind of an idiot do you think I am? Of course I pruned my tree. Very carefully. A snip here. A snip there. It is a lush, full, verdant tree. Have I pruned my tree? Give me a break. Please.

So then my friend Tom Airesman, who happens to own an orchard, come over. "Nice little tree", he said. "I bet it doesn't give you many apples." Funny you should say that, Tom...The nursery sold me a bum tree. "Tree's fine," Tom said. "Just needs to be pruned." So I went down to my cellar and got out my little scissor like pruners, only to come back to the tree and find Tom with a set of choppers that were four feet long. I want to tell you, he went to town on that tree.

When he was finished, about a third of the tree was laying on the ground. And, I should say, that the next year I had more apples than I knew what to do with.

What do you need to cut away from your life? Where do you need to stop? What habit do you need to give up? What distraction takes you away from where you could be doing incredible things?

Maybe it's a negative habit. Are you stuck in front of that television too often? Fascinated with some sites on the internet that are cancerous? Preoccupied with gossiping about the neighbors or carping about your family? Let them go. Ask for help, if you need to.

But you know, you might need to cut away something that's not bad in itself – just a distraction. For some years, I was involved in a ministry that was doing great things – and still is. I was good at what I did. I believe I helped change the world. But after a few years, it became clear to me that as good as that ministry was, it was distracting me from my primary calling to offer spiritual guidance here. So I pruned it away. It's still fruitful, and I'm more fruitful. Do you need to focus on one or two things in order to do them better?

OK. Story number two: Some years ago, I gave some strawberry plants to a friend. I showed her how and where to plant them so that they'd bear a bumper crop. I gave her the right fertilizer and a killer recipe for strawberry pie. The next year, she called me. "Thanks for nothing, Carver," she said. "I keep waiting for berries, but there's hardly anything there. Just a couple each week." I couldn't figure it out, so I went to look. In order to maximize the sun, we'd planted the berries in a nice low bed right in the middle of her grass. When I got there, her teenaged son was cutting the grass. When he got to the berry patch, he just ran the lawnmower right over top of the strawberry plants! Mostly, they were untouched. The only thing that the lawnmower cut off was, you guessed it, the strawberry blossoms that were reaching for the sun. The kid didn't know what he was doing, and when I showed him why he should mow around the patch, it only took a couple of weeks for the berries to show up.

Where do you need to be patient and wait for fruit in your life? There are some of us who get all excited about something, and then when it's not ready in ten minutes, we get frustrated and move on to the next thing. One of the key aspects to bearing fruit in our lives is sticking to it.

How often have you said, "You know, I need to be a part of a small group or a Sunday School class..." and then you've gone...every week...for two weeks? In week #3, you sleep in, you say, "Ah, you know, that's not meeting my needs the way I thought it should...I guess I was wrong." Come on, folks, hang in there! Read the whole book! Stick around long enough for something to develop! Give yourself intentionally for a season before you decide whether or not the fruit is growing there.

And now, story number three: After hearing me talk about my little garden for a number of years, Season Ciechanowski called me one spring with

excitement in her voice. “Dave,” she said, “I’m with you. I’m growing a garden this year.” Hey, that’s great! What are you growing? Season went on to describe the wonderful herb garden she had planted, and told me she was really looking forward to the basil that would enliven her cooking later that year.

A few weeks later, I was down at the house and I asked Season to show me her garden. We stood next to the driveway where she pointed proudly to a lush green plant covered with little yellow flowers. “I’m going to have so much basil!” she exclaimed proudly. “I can’t wait to share it.” It was at that point that I was compelled to share with Season the awkward truth that her “basil” plants were, in fact, tomato plants. She’d be cooking with zest, but not what she expected.

Are you open to God surprising you with new fruit in your life (and, technically speaking, a tomato *is* a fruit, so stay with me on the analogy here)? How often has someone asked you to do something and you’ve immediately shut them down because you’re “no good at that” or “it’d never work.” The truth is that there are times and places in life where God will surprise you. Desert places that turn into pools of life. Barren places that yield a harvest. Are you in such a comfortable place in your own life that you’re not willing to look for new or surprising fruit? God longs to bring forth something new.

Advent is not “church-ese” for “OK, let’s get ready for Christmas!” Advent is a time for reflection and taking stock. A time for looking back at where you have been and asking, “What did I learn there? Where do I need to adjust my course?” A time for looking ahead and asking, “What’s next? How can I grow into the future?”

Do our lives look the way that God intends them to look? Are the things that come out of your life in line with the purposes of God for you? I’d like to close this message with a time of prayer – a prayer for those who must prune something unfruitful from their lives...a prayer for those who need to wait and see what the Lord is doing in their lives...and a prayer for those who are learning and seeing some surprising things in their lives. Let us pray...