

God even uses stumps!

Isaiah 11:1-10; Romans 15:4-13; Matt 3:1-12
Psalms 72 – Responsive Reading

The Giving Tree is a children's picture book written and illustrated by Shel Silverstein. It was first published in 1964 and since has become a world wide best seller. Silverstein had difficulty finding a publisher as one editor said, it was "too sad" for children and "too simple" for adults. But Ursula Nordstrom, an editor, attributed the book's success partially to "Protestant ministers and Sunday-school teachers", who believed that the tree represents "the Christian ideal of unconditional love."

The book follows the lives of a female apple tree and a boy, who develop a relationship with one another. The tree is very "giving" and the boy evolves into a "taking" teenager, man, then elderly man. Despite the fact that the boy ages in the story, the tree addresses the boy as "Boy" his entire life.

In his childhood, the boy enjoys playing with the tree, climbing her trunk, swinging from her branches, carving "Me + T (Tree)" into the bark, and eating her apples. However, as the boy grows older, he spends less time with the tree and tends to visit her only when he wants material items at various stages of his life. Or he comes with a lady friend and carves "Me +Y.L." Is Y.L an acronym for "young love?"

In an effort to make the boy happy at each of these stages, the tree gives him parts of herself, which he can transform into material items, such as money from her apples, a house from her branches, and a boat from her trunk. With every stage of giving, "the Tree was happy".

In the final pages, both the tree and the boy feel the sting of their respective "giving" and "taking" nature. When only a stump remains for the tree, she is not happy, at least at that moment. The boy does return as a tired elderly man to meet the tree once more. She tells him she is sad because she cannot provide him shade, apples, or any materials like in the past.

He ignores this because his teeth are too weak for apples; he is too old to swing on branches; and too tired to climb her trunk. The boy now an old man states that all he wants is "a quiet place to sit and rest," which the tree, which is weak being just a stump, could provide. With this final stage of giving, "the Tree was happy".

Trees are mentioned in the Bible more than any other living thing besides The Almighty and people. So what does Isaiah and our Creator mean when they say, "A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit"? Trees are often used in the Bible to illustrate a heavenly truth.

For example: Psalm 52:8 declares, "But as for me, I am like a green olive tree in the house of God; I trust in the loving kindness of God forever & ever." Proverbs 11:30 informs us, "The fruit of the righteous is a tree of life, And those who are wise, wins souls." We resonate with the opening words of our Statement of Purpose from Psalms 1:3. "We will be like a tree firmly planted by streams of water, which yields its fruit in its season and its leaf does not wither; and in whatever we do, we prosper."

The Bible mentions the Creator made all kinds of trees to grow out of the ground along with two specific trees in Genesis – The Tree of Knowledge of Good & Evil & the Tree of Life.

I was surprised in researching for this sermon how many people in the Bible have a tree, shrub, bush or vine connected to them. For example, Noah received the olive branch (Gen 8:11). Abraham sat under the oaks of Mamre (Gen 18:1). Moses stood barefoot in front of the burning bush (Ex 3:2–5) Joseph might appear to be an exception, but the Bible tells us that Joseph is a fruitful vine near a spring. G 49:22

The same pattern is true in the New Testament. Zacchaeus climbed the sycamore tree. (L 19:1-4). The blind man saw people as if they were trees walking (Mk 8:24). The disciples gathered on the Mount of Olives (L 22:39).

The apostle Paul asserts that if we have ever gone for a walk in the woods we are without excuse for knowing God (Rom 1:20). Paul also wrote that followers of Jesus are like branches grafted into Israel's tree trunk, with roots that help us stand fast and firm no matter what troubles come our way (Rom 11:17–18).

Jesus also had connections with trees. He had issues with a fig tree. He talked more than once about bearing fruit. It was prophesied that Jesus would die on a tree and he did. And Isaiah 53:2-3 describes Jesus. "He grew up before him like a tender shoot, and like a root out of dry ground. He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by humankind, a man of suffering, and familiar with pain. Like one from whom people hide their faces he was despised, and we held him in low esteem."

So the Bible offers lots of connections and tie in with trees and plants. This is natural since the Almighty created lots of them. But a shoot from a stump growing & being alive? We all are familiar with cutting down plants & trees. When that happens – they are dead. Many of their stumps and roots are in the way of what we want to do next. Plus a stump is simply a **bothersome eyesore and in the way.**

Is that why the prophet Isaiah uses this image of a stump? It ties into an image Jesus used about himself – a stone. Jesus will be and is an irritant to many people, even his followers, because we are expected to live his values! Following Jesus is not just about belief and faith. It's following the way, the path, He gives us. Jesus concluding the Parable of the Tenants, says, "Have you never read in the Scriptures: 'The stone the builders rejected has become the cornerstone; the Lord has done this, and it is marvelous in our eyes.'

"Therefore I tell you that the kingdom of God will be taken away from you and given to a people who will produce its fruit. Anyone who falls on this stone will be broken to pieces;

anyone on whom it falls will be crushed." (Matthew 21:42-44)

It's easy to believe in Jesus – but to follow his expectations, is to go above and beyond what's reasonable! The Jewish religious leaders if anyone were on their way to salvation now and eternal life, with all their laws and lifestyle, it would be them! Their religiosity was to be commended! But Jesus expected more – and less from them. As he does with you and I.

Anyone with a vague familiarity with the Sermon on the Mount, Matthew chapter 5-7, knows that Jesus turns how we normally think and live – up side down. So that shoot out of a stump – is irritating to us.

John the Baptist's message was repent and produce fruit and prepare the way for the Lord. Make straight paths for him. This simply means we are to align our selves with that baby King. Proper beliefs and following the rules is not enough. John warned, "The ax is already at the root of the trees, and every tree that does not produce good fruit will be cut down and thrown in to the fire." Religiosity is not enough for salvation and eternal life!

Our **Romans** text gives us the familiar theme of harmony – with everyone. Accept one another just as you are accepted by a Holy Savior. God is telling this to a church that was and should be trying to bring in everyone – Jew & Gentile, slaves & owners, rich & poor, men & women, black & white, immigrants & settled people, all language & ethnic groups, all tribes & nations. Paul predicts, "The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the Gentiles will hope."

But this is so hard for us. This takes work on our part. It takes deep introspection. Clear communication. Honest appreciation of differences. And allowing that shoot out of Jesse's stump to produce fruit within us. That bothersome shoot out of Jesse's stump is still causing trouble today as we are challenged constantly to get with the Almighty's program.

But also, having a dead stump produce a shoot and then bear fruit – **is a beautiful image**. It's one of hope like John the Baptist and Paul describe. A way to be right with our Creator. A vision for harmony among all – right now – not just in the sweet bye and bye.

We have this prophecy that describes Jesus. “A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse; from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.” Jesse was King David's father. Joseph, Jesus' earthly father is from the same lineage. People when they understood Jesus' family tree, picked up on this image of a stump producing a shoot and then bearing fruit. Becoming a “giving tree.”

What does this stump from Jesse give us? It has some ideas for Jesus' first sermon. Isaiah tells us, it gives us Jesus. It gives us the Spirit of wisdom, understanding, counsel, might, knowledge and fear of the Lord. The shoot gives us a righteous judge who makes just decisions for the poor of the earth.

Isaiah gives us an amazing picture of what “harmony” looks like. Predator and prey live together - wolf and lamb, leopard and baby goat, lion and calf, bear and cow, lion and ox, poisonous snake and nursing child. They live together as one flock ... harmony.

This picture of true harmony is often called “the peaceable kingdom,” because it refers to the promise of a day when harmony will reign. This picture from Isaiah helps us to better understand what Biblical harmony is all about.

Within this vision of harmony is not the unreal expectation that wolves shall become lambs, or vice versa. Lions will continue to roar their notes of triumph & calves will continue to moo. It's a metaphor for tribes and nations, religions and ideologies, racial groups and so to, to play, eat, work, rest, to be harmonious together.

This word picture has the expectation all of creation, including people, will join together and sing in triumph and contentment and love, like we enjoy music with four part harmony

and instruments blending together. Together, though their notes are different, they make music with a common voice in unity, and not work malice against one another. And at times, each voice and instrument will offer a solo that shapes and moves and brings out the marvel of the tune that's being played. A bass needs the soprano, and the cello needs the saxophone to make a full celebration and song.

Our challenge is to allow Jesse's stump, that advent baby, to make this image real – today, right now in our lives – not just some dream for some day. Too often we short circuit ourselves and the fruit of that stump. We just let the vision sit. We kind of believe in it. We know it will happen some day. But we are called to help it happen now. It's a vision the advent scriptures give us for today and for the future.

In a rain forest near Auckland, New Zealand, a leafless kauri tree stump rises a few feet off the ground. These trees can become giants. The country's biggest, named Tāne Mahuta, or the “Lord of the Forest,” has grown 168 feet high, with a 115-foot canopy.

But there is a stump, so unassuming people just pass it by. One day, two ecologists spotted it on a hike. “A normal person would just think its dead. It looks dead to a point, but if you look a bit closer, you can see living tissue.” “We both said to each other, ‘It's clearly not dead. How does it live?’” Even though it had no leaves, stems, or greenery of any kind, it did still contain living tissue - and when they knocked on the stump, it *sounded* different from deadwood. All appearances to the contrary, it's still alive. How?

Naturalists have observed living tree stumps in New Jersey, the Sierra Nevada's, British Columbia and elsewhere. But for more than 150 years, how the stumps survived without leaves for photosynthesis was a mystery.

Leuzinger and Bader, the two University of Auckland ecologists, eventually showed that the stump is connected to one or more of the

kauri trees around it, probably via its roots. They are hydraulically coupled: The water flowing through the full-size trees also drives water through the stump, keeping it alive. It will never green again, never make cones or seeds or pollen, never cause a major problem, (unfall) never reclaim its towering height. But at least for now, it's not going to die.

The Biblical stump, although dead, has grown a shoot, with an outrageous dream. People tried to kill God's vision for this world, but that baby was resurrected. That shoot is a person, the Son of God sent to us as a helpless baby – with demands on us – to help make our Creator's vision for us and this world possible.

“The Root of Jesse will spring up, one who will arise to rule over the nations; in him the whole world will hope.” In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, for the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea.

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace as you trust in Jesus, so that you may overflow with hope by the power of the Holy Spirit. Come, let the little child lead us. May we accept what Jesus Christ offers us. May we find salvation and eternal life – even from a stump!