

"The Righteous Branch"

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¹⁴The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ¹⁵In those days and at that time I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David; and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. ¹⁶In those days Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety. And this is the name by which it will be called: "The LORD is our righteousness." (Jer. 33:14-16)

Looking ahead to the coming of the Messiah, Jeremiah likened the in-breaking of God into our world as a new branch, a new shoot of growth, coming off of an ancient tree. He was not the only prophet to use this metaphor. Zechariah even used the image as a title, speaking of God's "servant the Branch."¹ "Here is a man whose name is Branch," Zechariah wrote, "for he shall branch out in his place, and he shall build the temple of the LORD... he shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule on his throne."²

But perhaps the most familiar reference, and the one associated most strongly with Advent, comes from the prophet Isaiah: "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. ²The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.... with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth... Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them."³

The idea in all of these prophetic oracles is that the Messiah will come out of the kingly lineage of David. King David's father Jesse was a farmer and breeder of sheep. A known and respected resident of Bethlehem, he was the grandson of Ruth and Boaz. According to the prophets, the lineage of David would establish the royal pedigree and political significance of the coming Savior, the one who would redeem Israel. Later, the gospel writers would draw on the same thread – especially Matthew, who begins his story of Jesus with a detailed genealogy that roots the righteous Branch securely to the stump of Jesse.

Over the centuries, some pretty amazing religious art has sprouted from this metaphor. Early illustrated manuscripts depicted Jesus' connection to the line of David as a tree rooted in the body of David's father Jesse. The pattern was replicated in mosaics, stained glass, sculptures and wood carvings. These Jesse Trees are believed to be the origin of the secular idea of the "family tree," as noble families in the Middle Ages started depicting their own heritage as intricate trees that stretched their branches out in the world from generation to generation.⁴

So, as we begin our journey through Advent, we start with this very important branch in the family tree of the people of God. It is, by all prophetic accounts, no ordinary branch. In one sense, it is ***miraculous***, coming as it does from a stump. One of the ways that the prophets talked about divine judgment was to describe God as leveling or clearing away dead and damaged trees. Trees

¹ Zechariah 3:8.

² Zechariah 6:12-13

³ Isaiah 11:1-6.

⁴ <https://www.stcatherinercc.org/single-post/2019/11/25/whats-the-origin-of-the-jesse-tree>



that do not bear fruit are cut down and thrown into the fire. In this sense, a stump would be evidence of a painful and difficult history – proof that something in the past had gone terribly wrong. If Jesse was a stump, it would seem that his line had been cutoff, that its run was seemingly at an end.⁵ And yet, we are told, through the gracious mercy of God, this tree was destined not only to live, but to thrive.

The other key attribute of this particular branch is that it is a branch of “**righteousness**.” The Hebrew noun *tsedhâqâh* indicates this branch is “righteous” in the sense that it is “straight, right, and true” in the same way that an arrow must be straight, right and true. If an arrow is crooked, it will not fly correctly. If it isn't straight and true, it will most likely miss the target.⁶ So, this branch that God has promised will be more than just and morally pure; it will also be even, true, properly aligned, and upright. It will not be crooked, or gnarled, or twisted.

The fall after I took the bar exam, a friend of mine from law school and I had some time to kill while we waited for the results. We both like the outdoors, so we planned a week-long backpacking trip along a stretch of the Appalachian Trail in Virginia. We picked a section in the George Washington National Forest, bought a week's worth of food for the trail, and started out on a sunny and pleasant September afternoon. We had glanced at the local weather forecast, and it looked OK. The first night it drizzled a little, and we packed up in a light mist. But as we hiked that second day the rain began to pick up. The second morning on the trail, we set out in a steady rain. By that afternoon, the wind was picking up as well. Although we had planned to go further that day, we thought it wiser to stop for the night in a shelter on the biggest mountain on our hike, a mountain known to locals as “The Priest.”

We ended up staying in that shelter for fourteen hours. We knew we were riding out a big storm. What we didn't know at the time is that the storm we were riding out was Hurricane Fran, which had made landfall near Wilmington the day before, moved toward Raleigh, and then taken a turn to the north. As it crossed Virginia, Fran dropped thirteen inches of rain on the Shenandoah Valley, where my friend and I were camped.

Someday, I will tell you the whole story, because it was an adventure. But this morning I just want to talk about what we encountered when the rain subsided and we thought it was safe enough to get going again. The trail that had been dry the day before was now a stream of water tumbling down the back side of The Priest. About a half a mile down, we began to hear what sounded like a train rolling along in the distance. The farther we went, the louder it got, until we realized we were not hearing a train. What we were hearing was the creek that cut across the trail about halfway down the mountain. Under normal conditions, we would have crossed it with two hops from rock to rock. But that day, that would have been suicide. We were looking at twenty feet of raging whitewater. Looking to the left and the right, there were 10 to 20 foot waterfalls as far as we could see in both directions. I briefly considered looking for a downed tree that we could use for a bridge, but that would have been nuts. So, we stopped and got out our map. We saw that if we turned off the trail to the right and went cross country for a few miles, if we kept our heading, we would come to a state road. It was really the only sane option we had.

What we didn't know is that a few hundred yards from the trail our movement would become really difficult, because the way forward was completely covered by a dense thicket of rhododendron. I was pleasantly surprised to find that rhododendron grows up here too, because it is one of my favorite flowering bushes. But they are only beautiful if you are not in them. If you know rhododendron, you know that their branches are wiry and strong and very crooked. They

⁵ Todd Weir, <https://bloomingcactus.typepad.com/bloomingcactus/2010/12/isaiah-111-10-the-tree-of-jesse.html>

⁶ "Hebrew Thoughts" on Strongs #6663/#6666 (Tsedeqah), <http://new.studylight.org/ls/ht/index.cgi?a=554>

twist and turn on each other, weaving in and out in their search for some sunlight. That is why crowded thickets of these bushes are literally called "rhododendron hells," and that is exactly where my friend and I thought we were. It would have been hard enough to get through without huge packs on our backs. With them, we often found ourselves crawling on the ground under the knotted branches. I think we went about three miles like this, but it took us most of the day. Finally, we emerged at the road. We took a 50/50 chance and turned to the right. We got lucky, because just around the bend, with the sun finally beginning to peek through the clouds, we came upon a little country store. There was no power, but there was a working telephone. We both called our families to let them know we were alright.

We were happy and relieved, but exhausted. If those branches had been straight, our walk that day would probably have been pretty nice. But the branches we had to pass through were gnarled and twisted and crooked. We were tripped up with every step, making our way through a rhododendron hell. No wonder the prophets spoke of a "righteous branch" with anticipation and hope, because what they saw in Israel was a twisted, crooked mess. All the people have gone astray, Jeremiah had written. To quote him directly, they had taken "*slippery paths in the darkness, into which they shall be driven and fall*" (Jer. 23:12). "*They have stumbled in their ways... and have gone into bypaths... [they have left] the highway, making their land a horror*" (Jer. 18:15-16). Or as Isaiah sums it up, "*Their roads they have made crooked*" (Isaiah 59:8).

We know "crooked." We understand "crooked," because there is so much crookedness around us. In two prominent trials, our society is navigating a gnarled-up mess of guns, anger, misinformation, and fear, where the line that separates self-defense from indefensible violence gets twisted and blurred. We have been given a medical defense against a pandemic, a lifeline that we can grab onto that can pull us to safety. But even that story gets warped and mistranslated. We don't know who to trust, who to follow. We don't seem to have gotten very far from the admonitions of Psalms and Proverbs, which are full of warnings about crooked paths, crooked people, crooked speech, and crooked minds.⁷ We still need to heed the exhortations of Paul, who warned the Philippians that they are living "*in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation.*" In that diatribe, he used the Greek word *skolios*, from which we derive the medical diagnosis of "scoliosis," a debilitating condition of a spine that becomes painfully crooked and bent.⁸ We know crooked, because we stumble our way through crookedness every day.

However, on this 1st Sunday of Advent, we light a candle that represents hope – the very same hope that God offers to anyone who has been thrown off the path he or she hoped to take... to anyone who feels like they have wandered into a twisted and contorted mess... to anyone caught in the dark, crooked thickets of life -- rhododendron hells of our own making, or ones that we never saw coming. This gift that God has promised is not only just and morally pure; he is **even, true, and upright**. The righteous Branch says what he means and means what he says. He will not trip you up. He will not hit you when you are down. Like an arrow soaring toward its target, his flight will be true. And that is good news to a gnarled and crooked world.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

⁷ Psalm 18:26; 125:5; Proverbs 2:15; 4:24; 6:12; 8:8; 11:3; 11:20; 17:20; 21:8; 28:6; 28:18

⁸ "Skolios," Strong's Concordance, <http://biblehub.com/greek/4646.htm>, November 24, 2015;

"Scoliosis," <http://www.webmd.com/osteoarthritis/guide/arthritis-scoliosis>, November 24, 2015.