

The King Who Leafed Out  
Jeremiah 33:14-16  
November 29, 2015

*Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah. In 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. In those days Judah will be saved, and Jerusalem will dwell securely. And this is the name by which it will be called: The Lord is our righteousness.*

While winter is just beginning, and many people already are looking forward to springtime. Two of today's readings speak of spring, when leaves begin to bud and finally burst out in a marvelous show of new life. The Lord says through Jeremiah: *I will cause a righteous Branch to spring up.* In the Gospel reading Jesus says: *Look at the fig tree, and all the trees. As soon as they come out in leaf ...* (Lk 21:29-30 ESV). Both texts are speaking of trees figuratively as they describe the King of kings as the King who leafed out.

When Lucy van Pelt, of Charlie Brown fame, spots the last leaf of autumn still attached to a tree, she shouts, "Stay up there, you fool!" The leaf nevertheless is caught by a breeze and floats to the ground at her feet. Lucy, now more upset than ever, screams, "Oh, good grief! You wouldn't listen, would you? Now it's the rake and the burning pile ... You just can't tell them anything!"

It may be true that you can't tell leaves anything, but as for the King who leafed out, it's not for us to tell him anything at all, but to listen. Without our listening, it may mean the cataclysmic rake and burning pile for us as well. While we may chuckle over the antics of Lucy and Charlie Brown, we need to listen to the serious advice of Jesus.

Jesus will show us that he is rooted in promise. He is the promised Branch of Israel's princely family. He reveals to us some signs of his final "leafing out" so that we might be ready and, by his grace, avoid a fearful, eternal winter. Jesus is the King who leafed out.

The Advent season is not simply to prepare us for Christmas. It's a preparation time for eternity. One theologian writes: *The Advent season in its liturgical observance is devoted to the coming of God at the end of history when Jesus shall reign as King... The time is chiefly a celebration of the coming of our God' in ultimate triumph.* Advent reminds us that Jesus is coming as the Babe of Bethlehem, and coming again as the triumphant King of heaven.

The Jesus of history and the Lord of eternity are one and the same. He is rooted in the promises the heavenly Father made to the ancient patriarchs and prophets of Israel. God has committed himself to us in sacred oaths and promises of commitment: *The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah* (Jer 33:14 ESV).

In the birth of Jesus, that promise saw its fulfillment. But in the coming of Christ again, the ultimate completion of all his promises to us will happen. The Gospel of Christ is

rooted in promise, and that promise extends through the Lord's nativity and incarnation to the time when he will return.

Isaiah identifies this Root when he writes: *He grew up before him like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him. He was despised and rejected by men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief; and as one from whom men hide their faces he was despised, and we esteemed him not. Surely he has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows; yet we esteemed him stricken, smitten by God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions; he was crushed for our iniquities; upon him was the chastisement that brought us peace, and with his stripes we are healed* (Is 53:2-5 ESV). **Christ himself says:** *I, Jesus, have sent my angel to testify to you about these things for the churches. I am the root and the descendant of David, the bright morning star* (Re 22:16 ESV).

His roots are buried in ancient promises. He branched out from the royal family of Israel. Though Jeremiah, God says: *In 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* (Jer 33:15 ESV). The Savior is to come from a human family, the house of Jesse, whose son David became Israel's most honored king.

In becoming man, God's Son wrapped himself in the drapery of human history. Long before that happened, the triune God planned the way of salvation for the human race and prepared for it through other men. He spoke to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. He addressed Moses from the burning bush on Mount Sinai. Moses led God's people in their exodus from Egypt. Joshua led them into the fabled land *flowing with milk and honey* (Ex 3:8).

Judges ruled, and then kings reigned. Saul was the first. David, Jesse's son, the shepherd boy of Bethlehem, was the second. It was from the family of David that the King who leafed out would come. Isaiah foretold: *There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit. And the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him* (Is 11:1-2 ESV). Jesus will come as righteous King.

Jesus is still branching out into human history. He entered your life and mine through Baptism. He grows in us, and we in him, through God's Word. He comes to ease our fears, to love us and befriend us, to help us and forgive us. He went out on a limb for us – literally.

Humanity was plunged into sin when Adam and Eve ate the forbidden fruit of a tree. But on another tree – the cross – Jesus reached out to redeem us, so that we might live with him forever. He came to *execute justice and righteousness in the land*. As Jeremiah says: *The Lord is our righteousness*.

The Israelites were reminded of this every time they went to the temple. There they saw the menorah, the seven-branched lampstand designed by God (Ex 25:32-36; 37:18 ff.). By this lampstand the holy place of the temple was lighted. Through Jesus, the Light of the

world, we see clearly in a darkened world – as long as we are attached to him like branches on a tree.

Rooted in promise and branched out from princes, Jesus is the King who leafed out fully as the dazzling Tree of Life. Jesus brought relief from the wintry storms of human life. He gave us a springtime of joy, a season of celebration. He conquered both sin and death for us.

When Christ comes again, there will be another spring. The leafing out of trees is to be a sobering reminder that the end is near. Yet you and I have no reason to fear. We trust God's promises. We trust Jesus to provide shade from the blistering sun and protection from the ultimate storm when this world passes away. St. John tells us that in the new heavens and earth will stand the tree of life, and *the leaves of the tree [will be] for the healing of the nations* (Re 22:2 ESV).

Jeremiah teaches us that the person who takes refuge in God's grace will be *like a tree planted by water, that sends out its roots by the stream, and does not fear when heat comes, for its leaves remain green, and is not anxious in the year of drought, for it does not cease to bear fruit* (Je 17:8 ESV). The psalmist affirms the prophet. He says the person who is righteous through faith *is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers* (Ps 1:3 ESV).

Angela Elwell Hunt has retold a traditional folktale in her Tale of Three Trees. Three young trees grew as a little family on a high mountain. They dreamed of what they would like to be. One delighted in the glitter of the star-filled nights and said, "I want to be covered with gold and filled with precious stones. I want to be the most beautiful treasure chest in the world."

The second tree grew near a trickling brook that wound its way into a river and finally out to sea. "I want to be a strong sailing ship, traveling mighty waters and carrying powerful kings."

The third tree looked down on the villages in the valley below and said, "I want to grow so tall that when people stop to look at me they will raise their eyes to heaven and think of God."

Years passed by. One day three woodcutters arrived. One by one the trees fell to the woodcutters' axes.

The first tree, who wanted to be a treasure chest, was made into a feedbox. The second tree, who dreamed of becoming a majestic sailing ship, was made into a tiny fishing boat. And the third tree, who wanted to grow so high, was turned into lumber.

Years later, the feedbox found itself holding a Baby and drenched in golden starlight. Suddenly the first tree knew it was holding the world's greatest Treasure.

The second tree found itself sailing on the waters of a small lake. One evening a

wearied traveler and his companions climbed aboard the little boat, only to encounter a terrific storm. The tired man had gone to sleep. The other passengers were terrified, but when the tired man awoke, he stretched out his hand and ordered the storm to end. The second tree then knew it was carrying the greatest King of all.

One Friday some months later, the third tree was startled to discover it was being removed from the lumberyard. It flinched as it was carried through a jeering mob. It shuddered when soldiers nailed a man's hands to its branched arms. It felt abused and misused. By Sunday morning, the third tree knew that God's love had turned the ugliness of Good Friday into the beauty of Easter.

God's love made flesh had made the first tree beautiful beyond its dreams. The second tree was honored to carry a King far more majestic than it hoped. And the third tree would now cause everyone to think of God each time they saw its cross-shaped silhouette.