

The Stump King – Ben Wayman

Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

I'm a LeBron James fan. In the basketball world LeBron is known as King James. He's respected across the league, especially by the players. This week the Lakers beat the Jazz in Utah, and there was some chatter online about two Utah Jazz announcers who criticized LeBron for celebrating from the bench his teammate who made two straight blocks. The announcers volleyed back and forth saying, "*Look at LeBron, he's on the court. With no shoes, mind you. What the heck is going on here?*" That's some disrespect right there. Please. Look at LeBron, onto the court. No shoes on."

LeBron later responded to their criticisms, saying he was cheering on his teammates because he "loved seeing them succeed more than [himself]." LeBron was in socks because he had given his shoes to two young fans—a little girl and a little boy. The Lakers captured his act of generosity on video and captioned it, "A King on and off the court."

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. This is the church's season for celebrating the coming of Christ our King as we look forward to his second coming. Today's readings feature the strange rule of Christ, and what we find is a Christ in socks, who has friends and forerunners without proper clothes, and who looks to the world to be a bit, well, unrespectable. If the Jazz announcers were to comment on Christ our King based on our readings this morning, they'd surely criticize him and his friends for disrespecting the kingly office. This morning I'd like to suggest that we worship a King whose unrespectable appearance to the world signals his true power and authority.

Isaiah the prophet paints the picture first. Christ our King comes from a stump, not a tree, and certainly not one of the majestic trees of Lebanon spoken of in the previous chapter. A stump. How embarrassing. A few years ago, we had a sweet gum tree removed from our backyard that deposited a ridiculous amount of its not-so-sweet spiked balls all over our backyard—year round. The stump remains and it's not a pretty sight. It's also a reminder of the \$200 we were unwilling to pay to have the stump removed. It's a bit embarrassing.

It's not insignificant that Jesus comes from the stump of Jesse, as Isaiah the Advent prophet tells us. And the branch does not extend from a trunk, but from the roots. I know exactly what this looks like, because our stump still flashes a tiny branch every now and then from the roots, and it's strange. It's like a weed growing out of the grass that you can't get rid of. The stump of Jesse is all that remains, Isaiah tells us, and from its roots comes our King. Jesus the Stump King.

But the strange origin of our King signals an even stranger kind of rule—a Spirit-filled rule, with wisdom, power, and justice. This Stump King is on the side of the poor and the meek. This King is a peacemaker who makes possible new kinds of friendships and unimagined harmony between enemies. Unlike kings whose fake peace requires more war, this King turns carnivores into vegans and enemies into friends. And this King is not territorial. This King has made possible a place where no one will be hurt or destroyed, and this place of thriving is for every people and nation. Clearly, not your typical king.

The psalter amplifies this picture of Jesus and his strange kingship in Psalm 72. This is a royal psalm, possibly prayed and sung for a king's coronation. The great Saint Athanasius said that Psalm 72 "make[s] known the Savior's kingship and just rule, and in turn, his coming in the flesh to us and the calling of the Gentiles."¹ The vision of kingship here is again all about justice and equity for the poor and needy. And peace, true peace, is made possible by God's kingly rule.

Now, we like to say that God has no favorites. But that's just not true. God has favorites. He prefers the poor and needy. God is opposed to the wicked and the oppressor. And there's judgment for such people.

That's one of the reasons why being a parent is hard. Parenting puts us in the crosshairs for God's judgment because in parenting we can become a wicked tyrant or an unjust oppressor. Whenever someone is in a place of power over someone else, there is a possibility for abuse. That's a dangerous place to be. Our parenting needs to be full of confession and repentance to our kids for the times we misused our power and hurt them. I want to be that kind of parent, and I need to be that kind of person because my King demands it of me. King Jesus cares deeply about all people who are being oppressed and treated unjustly, and he will not deal kindly with those who oppress or otherwise hurt others.

Our reading from Romans reminds us that this Old Testament vision of kingship remains instructive for us even today, and that this should give us hope. In his letter to the Christians in Rome, Paul explicitly identifies Christ with the root of Jesse spoken of by Isaiah. Christ is the just and righteous Stump King Isaiah prophesied about. Paul also depicts God as our cheerleader who encourages us to live in harmony with one another. And Paul gives us a concrete example of how to live in harmony: by welcoming one another. What a word this Christmas season. Welcome one another, as Christ the King has welcomed us.

I have come to find that families are terrific training grounds for discipleship. Families provide occasions to welcome and forgive people who hurt us in the past and maybe even continue to do so. As hard as it is, we are called to love and welcome one another because that's what God has done for us. *Love your enemies and pray for those that persecute you*, King Jesus says. Sometimes our enemies and persecutors are at the Christmas table with us. Welcome them. Forgive them. In so doing, we live *in accordance with Christ Jesus*, Paul tells us. And when we do this, we live in the power of the Holy Spirit.

The final verse of our Romans reading is a regular benediction at Morning Prayer: *May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit*. Hope and power. Jesus the King, from the root of a stump, has true power, and this gives us hope.

John the Baptist had this hope coursing through his veins as he cried out from the wilderness. Again, a pretty unrespectable looking guy. He wore camel's hair and ate locusts. Forget about the shoes. John the Baptist was a wild man. To the people of his day, he was probably indistinguishable from any other social outcast, and certainly not a person who commanded the respect of the privileged and powerful. But not so for people of faith. People of faith had eyes to

see John the Baptist as a prophet. A prophet cut from the cloth of the great prophets like Elijah and Isaiah. And this strange voice crying out in the wilderness announced the strange King that would be born—not in a palace, but a barn.

So to sum up where we've been this morning, Jesus is a Stump King of a Stump Kingdom, with a bunch of stumpy disciples (that's us).

To see the gospel as good news, we need to see stumpiness—in socks, selfless encouragement, and cross-bearing—as a sign of the Kingdom. The gospel, Paul tells the Christians in Corinth, is foolishness to the world, *but to us who are being saved it is the power of God* (1 Cor. 1:18). That's because this world has decided respectability, position, and place are the stuff of success. But we are Christians who worship a Stump King, who was announced by a wild man who echoed the prophecies and prayers of a faithful people who hoped in the foolishness of God. God's power and presence have always been at the margins with the poor and needy who must rely on God for daily bread.

Relying on God for daily bread is difficult for many of us here because we're not financially poor or needy. So how can we become a people who can enter the kingdom of heaven? *Repent!* John the Baptist has the answer for us.

We need to repent because we have so much in common with the Pharisees and Sadducees who care so much about their own respectability, position, and power. On our days of compromise, we're embarrassed by stumpiness; we want to see ourselves as majestic trees and we want our king to be like a full-grown redwood. The line of thinking of the Utah Jazz announcers *is* the thinking of this world, but this Christmas, this very day, we are invited to enter into the foolishness of the Stump King, whose kingdom is announced and made ready by stumpy people like a wild man without shoes, crying out from the desert.

The image of King James in his socks, excitedly cheering his teammates from the bench after giving away his shoes, gives us a modern-day glimpse of the Stump King we serve and the Stump Kingdom he brings. King Jesus has given us everything we need to be his friends, eat with him, and enjoy him forever. King Jesus challenges us on our days of compromise, but makes our hearts sing when we receive his care and provision for us who need him every day in every way. May we this Christmas season become people who are ready to receive our Stump King and the surprising Kingdom he brings.

¹ trans. B. Wayman, *Make the Words Your Own*, 149.