

# “Nostalgia is a Powerful Thing”

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## Isaiah 11: 1-10 Common English Version

“A shoot will grow up from the stump of Jesse; a branch will sprout from his roots. The LORD’s spirit will rest upon him, a spirit of wisdom and understanding, a spirit of planning and strength, a spirit of knowledge and fear of the LORD. He will delight in fearing the LORD. He won’t judge by appearances, nor decide by hearsay. He will judge the needy with righteousness, and decide with equity for those who suffer in the land. He will strike the violent with the rod of his mouth; by the breath of his lips he will kill the wicked. Righteousness will be the belt around his hips, and faithfulness the belt around his waist. The wolf will live with the lamb, and the leopard will lie down with the young goat; the calf and the young lion will feed together, and a little child will lead them. The cow and the bear will graze. Their young will lie down together, and a lion will eat straw like an ox.

A nursing child will play over the snake’s hole; toddlers will reach right over the serpent’s den. They won’t harm or destroy anywhere on my holy mountain. The earth will surely be filled with the knowledge of the LORD, just as the water covers the sea. On that day, the root of Jesse will stand as a signal to the peoples. The nations will seek him out, and his dwelling will be glorious.”

I had to make a difficult choice about what to preach on today. Every year on this second Sunday of Advent we read about John the Baptist. I love to preach about him and his message, because he and it point us to Jesus, and also because he’s such a wild man. In the old Bible movies, *The Greatest Story Ever Told* and so on, all of the other characters have perfect hair and teeth and clean white clothes, and then there’s John the Baptist with his hair and beard flying everywhere, and dressed in camel hair, and yelling things like “You children of snakes! Who warned you to escape from the judgment that is coming?” I love it.

But I decided not to talk about my guy John this year. Instead I want to look with you at today’s passage from the Hebrew Scriptures, the Old Testament. I don’t think that I have preached from the Hebrew Scriptures very often the last few years, but I’m bearing in mind what someone said, don’t bypass the Old Testament to get right to Jesus in the New Testament. See the majesty of God, in Christ, starting in Genesis and going through all 39 books.

This year in the cycle of readings for Advent the Hebrew scripture passages are from the prophet Isaiah. He sets out a vision of the ideal age to come, when a king from David’s line will rule over God’s people with perfect peace and justice. The church has traditionally interpreted these prophecies as being about Jesus, such that one of the early church fathers said that Isaiah knew more perfectly than others the mystery of the

gospels, because he revealed so much about the nature and purpose of Christ's coming.

And the way Isaiah talked about this future age made his audience in ancient Judah hearken back to the good old days, when David ruled and Israel was united, when life was simpler.

Ah, the good old days. We talk about the good old days, too. I was raised with stories from my father about growing up on the farm in rural New Brunswick, going to the one room schoolhouse and then walking four miles to high school in snow up to his waist. As an adult I drove between his high school and the farm and figured out that it was only a quarter-mile. But that's nostalgia for you. Our memories get fuzzy as the years pass. I get nostalgic about when I was growing up in the late 1960s and early 70s, about getting milk delivered to our door, playing songs on 45 records where you got another song on the B side, putting hockey cards in the spokes of our bicycles. I'm less nostalgic about things like adults smoking around kids all the time, and cars not having seatbelts. And I would like to get some of those hockey cards back, as they're worth a lot today, because of nostalgia.

It seems that we're always looking back 20 or 30 or 40 years to when we were younger. When I was a kid there were all kinds of TV shows about the Second World War, which was 20 years before, *Combat* and *The Rat Patrol* and *Twelve O'Clock High*. That was a simpler war than the one going on at the time in Vietnam. Then in the 70s movies and TV were about the 1950s, 20 years before, *Happy Days* and *Grease* and *Laverne and Shirley*. I guess 20 or 30 years from now there will be shows about today.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing. It says that there was a golden age, better than today, that we can reclaim. It is particularly powerful at Christmastime, because we want so much to recreate what we think were the perfect Christmases of the past, our own past or a long-ago past. We want an old-time Victorian Christmas. Yet the Victorians themselves didn't think their Christmases were all that great; they looked back to the jolly Yuletide of England in the Middle Ages.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing. Look at politics in recent years. Think of American elections, just to use one example, and the slogan 'Make America Great Again'. It's an appeal to nostalgia. Voters being interviewed during the last two American presidential elections often spoke of how America was great during the 1950s. That's the golden age they wanted to bring back; the good times before all this change in the economy and culture. But if you interview black or gay and lesbian people, they probably aren't so nostalgic for the 50s, when discrimination was law.

And in the real 1950s, people didn't think they were living in a golden age. The threat of nuclear war hung over everyone. People in the 1950s looked back to the 1920s as a better time. But in the 1920s, people thought life was changing too fast and morals were too loose, and they were nostalgic for the late 1800s, a time of progress. Yet people in that late nineteenth century were in turn pining for a purer time, four or five decades before. And in those years people were nostalgic for the frontier days of the late eighteenth century. And educated people in that pioneer period were romanticizing Anglo-Saxon England and ancient Rome. This just keeps going. The ancient Romans wanted to return to even more ancient Rome.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing. It's powerful in the church. We tell stories of the good old days. Morning and evening Sunday services. Full Sunday school classes. Big choirs. The church with influence in society. Nostalgia is even part of the story in scripture, as I said, the looking back to the time of David and Solomon, even to the days of captivity in Egypt which looked good by comparison when the Israelites were hungry and thirsty in the desert, the Bible's recurring theme of getting back to the Garden of Eden, back before the relationship between humans and God was thrown off kilter.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing. And it's a very human thing. It's as human as love, and fear. Humans have been nostalgic as long as they have been able to write down their memories and feelings. We cope with change and suffering by wanting to reclaim a time when we felt better, or we remember feeling better, or we assume that we would have felt better. We want what we think would be simpler, purer, quieter. We want what is safely in the past, where it is immune to conflict or fact checking.

Nostalgia is a powerful thing, and a human thing. Stories of the good old days provide us with roots, and traditions, and comfort. We can learn a lot from the way we did things before, or our ancestors did things. Nostalgia, and tradition, and ritual, have great value.

But nostalgia can also be an obstacle. Sometimes, if we're honest about it, the good old days weren't really that good. Do we really want to return to the health care of the 1920s, or the nineteenth century? Do we want legalized racism back? Sometimes we don't remember the old days accurately. As we've heard, the people living in the times we are nostalgic for didn't see their time as a golden age at all, and they were nostalgic for an even more distant past. And the past we think was simpler was always more complicated than we believe. Sometimes the way we once did things just can't be brought back in today's context. For instance, the way the church worked 50 years ago may not work in 2016.

Well, it's impossible to bring back the past. "The past is a foreign country," someone said. We can't go back. We can't recreate it. And Isaiah, in a later chapter, tells us this, quoting God saying, "Don't remember the prior things; don't ponder ancient history. Look! I'm doing a new thing; now it sprouts up; don't you recognize it? I'm making a way in the desert, paths in the wilderness."

Isaiah tells us this morning that no matter how good the good times were, even better times lie ahead. The wolf will dwell with the lamb in this time of peace to come, when there will be no more harm or destruction, and the earth will be filled with the knowledge of God. Nothing in our past can measure up to what is to come.

So as followers of Jesus we point to a future in Christ that's worth embracing over the past. This doesn't mean we don't remember our past and our heritage. We do remember; it's part of who we are. One of our United Church faith statements, A Song of Faith, speaks of how we as the church need the Holy Spirit to help us to live an emerging faith while honouring the tradition passed on to us by our faithful ancestors. It's not either/or, it's both/and, just as in Advent we speak of Jesus Christ as having come in the past, among us in the present, and coming again in the future.

This means, I think, that nostalgia can serve to help to root us in our traditions, but not to constrain us or give us false ideas about today. This means that we are very much aware of the stories we tell and why we tell them. This means that we recognize what God says to Isaiah: the things of the past – look, they've already happened. I'm doing new things.

We can't just remove our nostalgia for the past, because it is helping us cope with pain and challenge in the present – unless we can replace nostalgia with something awesome. And we do have something awesome, shown to us by Isaiah, the vision of a reign of peace where the wolf will live with the lamb and the leopard will lie down with the young goat and the calf and the young lion will feed together and a little child will lead them, as the earth is filled with the knowledge of God just as the water covers the sea, and God says, as Isaiah quotes, "Look! I'm creating a new heaven and a new earth; past events won't be remembered, they won't come to mind." Be glad and rejoice forever in what I'm creating, God says, a future good beyond imagining, the end of pain and sorrow and death, the return of Jesus and life with God, the making new of all things, as everything finds completion and wholeness and union with their Creator.

Amen! Come, Lord Jesus.