

There used to be a lovely maple tree that shaded my back deck. To this day, I'm not sure which gift was more impressive: its endless shade, or the striking amber leaves it produced each fall. Unfortunately, that maple tree grew on the slope of our yard, and too many rainy seasons rotted its roots. Over time, the tree started to lean, and sooner than later it lost one of its major arteries. One afternoon, this beautiful friend of ours leaned so far over the porch rail that its branches began to violently scrape our gutters and windows. Melodious, yes. Safe, no. And so, we had to have our tree removed.

We did not, however, remove the stump. I don't remember if we were being penurious or sentimental, but since I'm telling the story, I'll say sentimental. Regardless, keeping the stump was fortuitous because it's now a useful sermon metaphor. "Why," you ask? Well, that stump knows how to grow some shoots.

My weedwhacker is tough, y'all, but it's no match for maple shoots. Those shoots are determined, and persistent, and tough-as-nails. Only the sharpest of blades will prune them.

The stump occupies a prime piece of playing-around real estate for my daughters, so for now, I've not allowed its shoots to shoot up very high. But whenever I do decide to let them shoot up, there's a pretty good chance that my daughters might one day sit in the shade of its branches with their own children.

In this morning's text, we meet the prophet Isaiah in exile. The once proud Judean monarchy has fallen, and all that remains of the Davidic line is a stump. But we could do worse than a stump. 'Cause, shoot, y'all, stumps know how to grow shoots, too.

Isaiah is telling his audience that God will reclaim life from this lifelessness. A new leader is going to emerge, a king who leads with the spirit and wisdom of the Lord. This little shoot is gonna grow mighty branches that offer the shade of God's love, not to mention leaves that bear the colors of God's vast possibilities.

Isaiah goes on to describe the kind of leader who is going to lead in a world-changing kind of way. Down will be up, up will be down, cats and dogs living together, a new world order – not only in who orders it, but in how it's ordered.

At the center of this ordering is a new kind of peace and a new kind of leader.

I think we are all familiar with the "forced" peace that's been highlighted since the days of antiquity. A powerful warrior king exerts dominance over his enemies. His masses are fed by sacking the cities of his enemies, and taking the provisions of their masses. Powerful nations hoard their wealth at the expense of their enemies. They build big walls. And they keep sharp blades. And they turn the levers of power. Mmmm, the stillness of peace.

I think we are also familiar with the traditional ruler. He's a man's man. He's so powerful he can rip apart lions and bears with his bare hands. And his justice is swift. He wields the institutions of power with might.

This isn't Isaiah's peace. And this isn't Isaiah's ruler. This new ruler is going to seek to create peace by being kind, by being hospitable, by being empathetic to the needs of his people. He's going to feed them. And shelter them. And even listen to them. He's not gonna make war

on the nations; he's gonna make war on the tired ways and systems that insist on war. He's gonna love humanity into an authentic peace.

This ruler isn't a lion hunter, or even a lion tamer. This ruler is a lion whisperer. He's not trying to create a world of domination. He's working to create a world of collaboration and partnership. He's looking to dismantle the violence that infects every aspect of our living. And he's looking to replace that violence with belonging, and acceptance, and provisions, and cooperation.

This leadership, this community, this way of being is going to spring about, and there's gonna be peace on God's holy mountain.

This text is read in the Jewish tradition, and those who read it hope expectantly for the manifestation of this envisioned king. And in the Christian tradition, we read this text as well, seeing Jesus as an expression of this long-awaited Messiah.

I think it's important, whoever we are, to not be so quick in confusing a shoot for the full-grown tree. And indeed, to not be so in quick in hoping for a tree rather than a shoot.

Yes, the Christchild is coming into this world! But the baby's arrival is not the completion of God's world. Rather, it's the confirmation of God's enduring presence among us. Messiah's arrival is not an invitation for us to step back and let God happen; for us to be passive agents in the reordering of God's world. Messiah's arrival is instead, an invitation to join in God's spirit; to be active agents in helping to make God's love manifest throughout the universe.

I still keep thinking about those maple shoots in my backyard. I'll admit I like order and clean lines. I like sharp borders, and neat grass, and I don't want anything to block the sun from the summer bulbs I've planted. And so, every now and again, I cut back those shoots. I'm not quite ready to change the world order of my lawn.

But I also keep thinking about the parable of the mustard seed. That tiny seed grows into a large bush big enough for a bird to build a nest. It's also a nosy plant – it gets itself all tangled in everything around it. You might say it changes the order of things. It complicates. And disrupts. It even chokes out those “prettier” plants we'd prefer it wouldn't.

I suppose those maple shoots are nosy, too. They've got a mind to grow. They are bent on reclaiming something that was once laid bare. They want to thrive. And yes, they are going to challenge the symmetry of their landscape. And theirs is the kind of growth whose fruit won't be realized for generations, and yet they are no less bent on growing.

The calendar tells us it's the Sunday of Peace. Isaiah tells us there is One whose arrival will initiate our longed-for peace.

We are preparing to be aware, awake even, for God's arrival. But I think that's only half the challenge. God's coming into the world whether we are ready or not.

The more important question is how we are preparing ourselves to receive and respond to God's arrival. In the year ahead, will we insist that God conform to a predictable peace? After all, we like nice clean lines in our garden, and like old James B. Duke did a century ago in Myers Park, we'd just prefer to plant our trees already grown.

*From Shoot to Shade*  
Bob Stillerman  
2<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Advent (Peace),  
Luke 6:20-31



a spiritually  
progressive  
community  
of faith

Or are we willing to both imagine and work for a new peace? It's fragile. It'll come into the world like an infant. And it may not be all that pretty. In fact, it could be downright scrawny and skinny. And it's slow but steady growth might disrupt the sightlines of a more picturesque peace. But it's rooted. And persistent. And with the right care, it might just provide the kind of shade we never thought possible.

It's a new year, Sardis. Maybe we should stop worrying so much about pruning what lives in our backyards, and start worrying about to how prune away those weeds that choke our ability to see and experience God's redemptive and creatives purposes. Let's shoot for a shady peace!

May it be so, and may it be soon! Amen.