

CHRISTMASIZE YOUR LIFE

The state of Washington is evergreen country. In some parts of the world like the Pacific Northwest, trees that drop their leaves in the fall are but random presences in nature. Most trees are some kind of conifer like pine, fir, or cedar. So what makes a wild, unmanaged forest so vital- even when the forest floor looks more like the closet floor of a teen-ager's room? Scattered among all those messy, mossy, decaying evergreen forests are especially nurturing sites known as nurse logs. Nurse logs are simply great big hunks of dead, decaying tree trunks.

Except they are only dead at the level of the first generation, the initial tree that fell to the ground. In reality that dead tree is thriving. For it's busy giving life to a whole new generation for the forest. The decaying surface of the dead tree creates a perfect growing site for a tiny seed, a struggling seedling, even a young sky-seeking sapling. The decaying tree becomes nursemaid to the upcoming new tree generation.

Every Christmas we take the time to decorate those beautiful symbols of new-life-out-of-old. Pretty ribbons and golden bells adorn the even, tender, and delicate green of the new tree that grows and flourishes on the stability, strength, and sustenance the old, broken tree provides for it.

That's the same image, the same eternal care, the same divinely planned sustainability that this week's text from Isaiah describes with such poetic power. Notice how the prophet describes the coming of the great new messianic king, the ruler who will redeem Israel and reclaim her favored place among all nations. He doesn't describe a giant, or a sudden storm of divinely charged power. Instead the prophet's image starts small. The long awaited Messiah arrives as a tiny, tender green sprout.

This sprout doesn't spring up out of a carefully prepared, plowed and furrowed field. Its source for germination is the decaying stump of an old, once-powerful name. Jesse, the father of David, was thus the father of the entire line of the Davidic monarchy. Jesse gave life to a king, who in turn gave life to the greatest age of power and influence in Israel's history.

Even though Isaiah's message to Israel in the first ten chapters has declared the nation's decay and the people's spiritual bankruptcy, the history of Israel's relationship with God isn't dismissed or discarded. The past generations, all those who had lived and died, made up a rich, fertile layer of spiritual soil- a deep, complex medium capable of sustaining the new generations yet to come. Even in her most broken, battered condition, even as a seemingly dead stump, there is a vital essence that can nurture a new divine presence in their midst.

The messiah is described first as a single shoot. But there is a deeper source to this new ruler's life. It's not just the stump of Jesse that gives new vitality. It's the roots themselves; it's that which nurtured and brought life to Jesse himself. The messiah springs both from Jesse and from the divine presence that existed before Jesse, before Israel. The messiah's roots are in God, in the divine mystery itself. It's these roots of divinity which enable the spirit of the Lord to flow through this tender shoot, a spirit which brings wisdom and understanding counsel and might, the knowledge and the fear of the Lord.

Roots, stumps, spindly green shoots and tender new branches- none of these images are big, flashy, or impressive in any worldly way. They are instead small, simple signs of life and hope and the divine presence in the midst of the people. It's increasingly hard to sell small as anything good to our twenty-first century consumer. Those few items we do want to be physically small (iPods, PCs, cell phones, etc.) are only good because they pack a big technology wallop. In one of the latest new editions of Webster's Dictionary, yet another pop culture term has been credentialized: bling-bling.

Bling-bling, for those of you who don't have teenagers or aren't pop-music fans, refers to big, gaudy, bright baubles with which one decorates oneself and one's life. Huge chunky gold jewelry, over-sized and obviously fake gems, sequins, and over-the-top glitz of all kinds, qualify as bling-bling. Bling-bling exists for one reason and one reason only; to be noticed.

There is verbal bling-bling as well as physical bling-bling. The trend in everyday conversation is to use grandiose words. Outstanding is the new good, amazing! Is the new OK, and huge! Is the new big. We were in a restaurant in Columbia a while back and everything we asked was answered in superlatives.

US: How's the salmon? SERVER: Fantastic! US: Does it come with rice? SERVER: Absolutely! Wouldn't a good and a yes have been sufficient? Undeniably! At Starbucks, Tall is small. Grande, which is both Italian and Spanish for large, is medium. My chest size hasn't changed since I was in high school and back then I wore large T-shirts. But now for them to fit as they did 40 years ago I must buy 2XXL. Have you been listening to how people describe the news? It's not good or bad, it's wonderful or devastating. How's the weather? Either beautiful or horrible.

Despite cultural appearances to the contrary, the Christmas season is NOT about bling-bling. To be sure, that doesn't seem to be the case after a walk around the malls and down streets garlanded and glistening, dressed up and gaudy. But in the season of advent we're not preparing for the arrival of a dazzling behemoth. We're preparing for the arrival of a small, seemingly insignificant shoot. Advent looks forward not to blinding bling-bling but to twinkle, twinkle little star. Advent is about roots and shoots, not frou-frou and fal-de-ral.

As with so many divinely sent messages advent, gets skewed and skewered by human nature, making our attention to the small, the fragile and the faltering even less at this time of year. Instead of

celebrating the twinkle-in-the-eye of God, we're blinded by the glare of Wal-Mart, Macys, and Target glitz and glamour. Instead of this being the season when "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" this becomes the season when the wolf comes out in all of us.

Don't think so? Check out the parking lot of the mall. Listen to the horns honking and people yelling obscenities at each other. Witness the NASCAR antics as drivers desperately race for the next available parking space. Try dodging the rat-race running for the nearest entrance.

The advent season is the time of year to christmasize your life.

To Christmasize your life means to pay attention to the small voice, the small growth, the small crack, the small table, the small talk, the small town (like Bethlehem), the small change, the small children... "And a little child shall lead them."

To Christmasize your life means to live in the light of Dr. Seuss' Horton Hears a Who, where one small voice rallies an entire village.

To Christmasize your life means to recognize the importance of unimportance.

To Christmasize your life means to start small, to pay attention to those things that are smaller than life, to sweat the small stuff.

To Christmasize your life means to honor the fact that big things don't become big, only small things become big.

To Christmasize your life means hearing God say to each one of us: "You dreamed to do great things. You did small things faithfully and well. Well done, good and faithful servant."