

If a tree falls in the forest and there's no one around, does it make a sound? Well, if it falls in California's Sequoia National Park, it very definitely makes a sound. But not in the way you might expect.

You see, a few years ago, just such a thing happened. A massive Giant Sequoia fell in the park, oddly enough, splitting at the base as if someone had just snapped it like a toothpick. The tree had become diseased and rotted and no one had noticed until it fell.

Now, as old, as huge, and as majestic as the Giant Sequoia's are, they occasionally fall. It happens. But this one decided to fall across a path. A paved, handicapped accessible path. Which meant that the park service couldn't simply ignore it like they did most other fallen trees in the forest. They had to do something about it.

But what to do? No sooner had the tree fallen than a massive public debate began over the fate of it. Some took the pragmatic approach. It's a tree. It's dead. Do what you do with any other dead tree. Chop it up, clear the path, and sell the wood.

Others were more sentimental. It's hundreds of years old. You can't just chop it up and sell it. Leave it alone. People love climbing over it. It's nature. Well... accept that it's a handicapped accessible path in a national park and that doesn't really work. How about a ramp over the top? But that's gonna cost a fortune to build and maintain.

It didn't seem like there was a right answer to the dilemma. And while some people said that it would have been better if the tree had never fallen in the first place, that wasn't true either. Because trees need to fall. It's how forests stay healthy.

A forest full of diseased trees won't survive very long. A forest full of dead and dying trees will never grow new ones, because the new growth needs the old trees to fall. They need decaying wood to grow in and openings in the canopy to let sunlight onto the forest floor. It's part of the circle of life, if you will.

The reason I bring all this up is because our Old Testament lesson uses the analogy of a fallen tree. He writes in the first verse, *"There shall come forth a shoot from the stump of Jesse, and a branch from his roots shall bear fruit."*

The stump of Jesse. The roots of Jesse. This is not the image of a vibrant, healthy tree here. This is the image of a fallen tree. The dead, rotting remains of a tree that fell in the forest long ago, snapped off at the base. And it made a very loud sound when it fell. The sound of civil war.

You see, the man "Jesse" that Isaiah is referring to here is Jesse of Bethlehem. Jesse lived several hundred years before Isaiah's time. But Jesse was well known to everyone because he was the patriarch, the great-great-granddaddy, of all the kings of Israel.

Saul may have been Israel's first king, but he was disaster waiting to happen. God had warned them from the very beginning that a man like Saul was a terrible choice to become king. But Saul was strong and brave and popular and the people chose him nonetheless. But when Saul went insane with power and became an absolute tyrant, they soon regretted that choice.

So God went to the prophet Samuel, and He told him, "Now you're gonna go and you're gonna pick out my kinda king. You're going to go to Bethlehem and you're gonna find a man named Jesse and you're gonna anoint one of his sons to be king."

So Samuel went and he found Jesse and he told him why he was there. And Jesse was thrilled, of course. What father wouldn't be? And he brought his oldest son out. Handsome and strong and intelligent. And Samuel said, "Yes!" And God said, "No." And so they went to the next son and the next son and the next, all the way to little David, Jesse's youngest son. And finally, God said, "Yes. That's him."

And he was right, of course. Because David would become the greatest king ancient Israel would ever know. Oh, sure, he was a sinner. He had his flaws. He may have... you know... murdered a guy to cover up an affair. But what politician hasn't?

No, by and large, David was exactly as advertised. A man after God's own heart. Who led Israel in the absolute height of the kingdom. Not because it was a time of great peace or prosperity. Actually, it was a time of almost constant warfare and hardship.

No, it was the height of the kingdom because it was the time when Israel was closest to their God. They had a king who led by example. Who didn't just tell the people to pray. He prayed in front of them. He didn't just tell the people to worship. He worshipped in front of them. He didn't just tell the people to repent. He repented in front of them.

For decades he led Israel as king. And when he died, it looked like his legacy would endure. Solomon, his heir, set out immediately to build a glorious temple to the Lord. But, like David, Solomon had his own flaws. And in the end he committed a sin far worse than murder. He allowed foreign gods to enter his kingdom. He began his reign bringing people closer to God. And he ended it by pushing them farther and farther away.

So that when his son, Rehoboam, took the throne, a disease had begun to rot away this tree of God's people. And it quickly split in the middle, with civil war and a divided nation. Broken and diseased, first the Northern Kingdom died. Then the Southern. And all that was left was the stump of Jesse. The remnant of a dead tree.

Or so it looked. But God was not finished with Jesse's line. The seed he had planted long ago grew up in the midst of Israel's decay. A tree of Jesse's line would grow in Bethlehem once again.

The people clinging to their old tree didn't want to admit it. They didn't want to admit that they were nothing more than kindling to be thrown into the fire and burned. They would rather be a dead, fallen tree, devoid of life and growth, than a new, living tree, bearing fruit for God's kingdom. And they tried to cut this new shoot down. But it wouldn't die. Because it was the tree of life itself.

A tree planted for us. To give us life and life in abundance. We are branches on that new tree. Grafted on and drawing strength from its roots. For from that root of Jesse a signal to the nations has sprung up. A signal to the Gentile. To those who were outside of Abraham's covenant. For God has raised up children even from the stones of the earth. He has gathered a hopeless people and given them the hope of Jesus.

True, we are still diseased in our own way. We bear the same disease of sin that David and Solomon and Rehoboam and all the people of God who came before us did. We are no better than them and no stronger in and of ourselves. And we deserve to be thrown into the fire with the rest of the dead wood.

The difference, though, is that we live and draw our strength from a tree that is far stronger than what came before. Stronger than human flesh and human sin. Stronger than human kings and human leadership. Stronger and more faithful than even David himself.

We are branches on the tree of a divine king. A man who is the incarnation of God's own heart. A man who sacrificed everything to make us his own. So that even though we still struggle in sin, we have life in his name and bear fruit for his kingdom.

For we are Baptized into his life, death, and resurrection. Because the Spirit of the Lord rested upon him, the Spirit of the Lord rests upon us. A Spirit of wisdom and understanding, counsel and might, of knowledge and the fear of the Lord. That Spirit lives in us, teaching us righteousness. Teaching us repentance. Teaching us the fruit of repentance, which is faith in his work on the cross.

The tree of Jesse fell in the forest. But from his stump a new tree sprang up. We are blessed to be branches on that tree. And we rejoice in the hope of Christ's salvation. Amen.