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## *Stumps and Shoots, Branches and Roots*

**A sermon on the day of the Annual Parish Meeting by Dean Sam Candler  
Advent 2 – Year A**

*A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,  
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.  
The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,  
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might,  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.  
His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.  
He shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;  
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,  
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.  
Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,  
and faithfulness the belt around his loins. (Isaiah 11:1–5).*

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” A stump, a shoot, a branch, a root.

I know we are beginning the season of winter (or late fall, at least); and so our thoughts are not given over to images of fresh things growing. Still, this familiar Advent lesson speaks of new life: stumps and shoots, branches and roots.

In a way, our church does start a new year this week. It is the season of Advent, which begins a new liturgical year. I have never really thought of Advent as the beginning of a New Year; it's not like January 1, or Easter, or Rosh Hashanah, which are all better ways to observe New Year's Day.

However, this particular parish, the Cathedral of St. Philip, does begin a new year today. Today is the occasion of our annual parish meeting. We hear reports, we elect. We think about the future. So, I want to use these Advent words of the prophet Isaiah to consider our church, our cathedral parish. I want to talk about stumps and roots, and branches and shoots.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” The difference between roots and stumps is that roots begin first. Roots form underground and gather water and nutrition. Roots anchor the essence of the tree. A stump, of course, comes later. A stump is what is left over when the trunk of the tree is cut away.

We, the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, are a living organism; we are a tree that has had roots and stumps. Yes, we are a living organism. Sometimes, people applaud our operations and community by comparing us to a “well-oiled machine.” It's a familiar compliment, and people mean it well.

But I usually object to that comparison. We are not a machine at all, made of precise gears and slots and screws, as if one part could be easily replaced by another part. No, we are a living, loving, organism; and no piece of the body can ever be exactly replaced by someone else. We are not just machine screws. Every new person in our community adds a distinct, and unique, new living cell in the organism. It is the people of this community who give us life, not the operations and concrete structures and machines. We are alive!

Our roots go deep. We were the first Episcopal Church organized in the city of Atlanta, in 1847. We started as a group of railroad officials and administrators, on property directly across from the new capital of the state of Georgia. Our roots were in the Protestant Episcopal Church of The United States. The words “Protestant” and “Episcopal” were both important in those days. We would have bishops, yes; but we would also maintain the Protestant element of Christianity, the holiness and authority of the individual believer. We would be both catholic and protestant.

As Episcopalians, we were –and are Anglicans—part of what would later be called the Anglican Communion of Churches. Anglican roots mean that we are not the Middle Way, the *Via Media*, in Christianity. We are the Both Way. Catholic and Protestant. The comprehensive way, the *Via Comprehensiva*. Those roots are part of the DNA of our living organism.

Our church grew, as did Atlanta’s population, especially northward. We moved up here to Peachtree Road and Andrews Drive in 1932, when there were no other major churches here yet. By the 1950s and 1960s, our attendance and Sunday School growth were enormous. Our shoots and our branches were strong.

But the 1960s cut away some of our branches, and even some of our trunk. The Episcopal Church took strong positions in the civil rights movement, positions that were too strong for some people and way too weak for others. We lost some members. Then, the ordination of women, and the acceptance of gays and lesbians in the church, caused other important members of this parish to cut themselves away. They often started other churches.

In some ways, this cathedral parish was left as a sort of stump by the early 1990s. Our character was dormant and maybe even depressed. In the early 2000s, when we began to take clear stands on our need to bless gay and lesbian relationships of love, a few members of this church seemed to cut themselves away again.

But we held that time, and a shoot came out of the stump of Jesse! A branch came out of the roots. With love, with grace, with excellence, and with hospitality, we held; and we grew together. We grew from our roots, by realizing that we can be both traditional and progressive. We can be both catholic and protestant. We can be the Comprehensive Way. We grew with the root of Jesse and the Spirit of Christ.

Now, of course, by comparing our parish with Isaiah’s prophecy of a savior, I do not mean to speak too boastfully of our church. Sometimes, we are a long way from being a savior. We do plenty of things wrong. We are not near perfection.

But we do try to faithfully proclaim wisdom and understanding, as Isaiah said of the savior. Indeed, we try to be a living organism, the Body of Christ, in the world. We resist the simplistic categorizations that divide our world today. Those simplistic characterizations can be heard in many of today’s Twitter accounts – those that spew forth pronouncements, either liberal or conservative, that are too simplistic to be of value. They do not enable people to grow.

As the Body of Christ here at Peachtree and Andrews, we try to be that living community where Isaiah said the Spirit of the Lord rests,

*“the spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
the spirit of counsel and might  
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.*

Where there is a Savior who

*“...shall not judge by what his eyes see,  
or decide by what his ears hear;  
but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,  
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.”*

As the living organism of Christ in the world, we try to be leaders who enable people to grow, not leaders who

simplistically judge. After all, leadership is about growing people, not judging people. We are not a judging church. We are a growing church.

“Wisdom, understanding, counsel, and might,” said Isaiah. Yes, these are the kinds of shoots and branches we grow. Our long history as a parish means that we have both established branches and new shoots!

On this day of the annual meeting of the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, I am thankful for our stumps and shoots, our branches and roots. My hope for this new year is to proclaim that wisdom and understanding. My hope is to be a clear model, for the world, of what it means to be a provider of wisdom and understanding, of love and life, in this clashing and judging age.

When some people want to cut away the trunks of organizations and institutions, we make a bolder and more powerful claim: that the world needs churches and institutions with deep roots of wisdom and counsel and experience. The world needs an Anglican Way that is fully traditional and fully progressive, but which refuses to be reduced to simplistic categories. The world needs us, the Cathedral Parish of St. Philip, the Body of Christ in the world.

AMEN.

The Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler  
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip

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