My brothers and sisters in Christ, let us pray. God of our Advent waiting and preparation, may the words of my mouth and the meditation of all of our hearts always be acceptable in Your sight, Our strength and our redeemer, Amen.

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. . .” The stump is dead. God had said it would be so. Just before this chapter, God declares punishment on the people: “the tallest trees will be cut down and the lofty will be brought low.” The trees, the people -- both will be clean cut off. Who could imagine anything growing as they sat on the stump of utter despair? I’ve sat there myself, perhaps you have, too. You may be there now -- at that place where hope is cut off, where loss and despair have deadened your heart. God’s Advent word comes to sit with us. This word will not ask us to get up and dance. It asks to give us pause and to use our holy imaginations remembering and projecting God’s love.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse”… fragile, yet tenacious and stubborn. It would grow like a plant out of dry ground. It would push back the stone from the rock-hard tomb.

But has that time arrived yet in our lives? Have we been so impacted by the world that we cannot see a future full of spirit, but one where all is cut off? And yet, another word comes from the very same prophet: “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” A stump is a start. A stump is a beginning.

We have all read and heard about and have seen the inspiring stories surrounding the Boston Marathon Bombings and the ones who, through no fault of their own, lost limbs in the resulting explosion and shrapnel bombs from that day. Through the hard work of doctors, families, friends, and their own tenacity, many of these folks have taken steps to move forward in their lives, re-starting dreams that once seemed taken away—marriage, bearing children, running, walking on the beach.

But away from the hero stories on the 11 o’clock news, there are stories happening every day that don’t get news coverage but for where the struggle is just as hard. Leg amputations from an accident, or an illness, or from the complications of an internal medicine condition.

It starts with a stump. It starts with a letting go. It starts with the knowledge that yesterday things were organized in a certain way, and that they will never be the same again. Temporary prosthetics are 2-3 weeks away, a more permanent one still a matter of months away. It is with this backdrop that I met the one who taught me about possibility and promise in the face of trauma. His name was Steve, not Jesse, but it should have been. By the time we met he had led quite a life since his defining moment at age 28, falling asleep at the wheel behind a semi-tractor trailer and then running headlong into a mom with her two kids in the car killing them all.

He walked away from the accident without any physical scars, but that day was still present in his mind. as if it were yesterday. Steve had served 5 years for involuntary manslaughter, and here we were 24 years later, and he was in the hospital where I was doing chaplaincy work. He was what the hospital staff called a ‘frequent flier’, coming in and out several times a year for various accidents and ailments. This time peripheral artery disease had taken his left leg, which had been cut off.

And so Steve was sitting there waiting. For the nurse? A visitor? I don’t know, but I inquired on the state of his day, and he began to talk. And over the coming days, he talked about the prison, the inmates, the drugs, the counseling. How he felt cut off, because even the slightest mis-step with any of these had dramatic implications for a person going through the system.

Steve talked about how he had been cut off from his job. Cut off from his family. Cut off from just about anything he had known before but also anything that he tried to start. Because, you see, criminal records follow you around, not allowing people to have an open and honest view of you.

They make assumptions about involuntary manslaughter. They never asked why, that it was because he was working a double shift to try and make some additional money so he could surprise his mom and buy her a better car than the one she had. Because manslaughter just doesn’t jive with being tired, does it?

And yet through each place he lived, each job he took to scrape by, each time he relapsed and took up another vow to try again this day, Steve embodied this scripture. So many times, Steve had been cut off and left for dead, but a shoot shall come out from the stump, and a branch grow out of his roots. For Isaiah, this meant that the nation would never rise again. The shoot would not become a mighty cedar. The shoot that was growing would be different from what the people expected. For Steve, renewal was what kept him alive and going, even as the ravages of time and disease signaled otherwise. In him, I saw far into third Isaiah, a renewal of spirit and life foretold about another young person:

“He grew up before them like a young plant, and like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or majesty that we should look at him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.”

I saw Steve’s picture as a young man. Good lookin’. But that was not the Steve in that bed. He no longer had any majesty as the earth would judge him, yet his eyes were soft as he lived in awe of all that was around him, the people who now cared for him, and how he held no bitterness toward all that he had suffered. All because he was tired but loving and wanted to surprise mom.

Most scholars would have a big beef with my sermon today, saying this is about the salvation of a nation, and that once again we’ve made the protestant/evangelical mistake of taking group sin and repentance to an individual level. And I would calmly remind them that is why they teach in seminary. Because out here when we’re with each other in real communities facing the world and all its ill winds, what are we to say about this? Are we forced to conclude then that Jesus was a failed messiah? No, but we may have to concede that his ministry is fundamentally incomplete. But that’s the beauty of Advent and the foretelling of the coming of the one who saves. Because as we prepare our hearts, our longing hearts, to be saved, maybe we can take this out of the text of 2,500 years ago, apply it to a guy named Steve, and learn something about ourselves along the way.

I’ll leave you with these thoughts. Isaiah 11 allows us to celebrate Jesus' ministry in the past and especially in the present, but the text also urges us to the place of intercession, where we long for creation's promised destiny, as a place where peace, justice, and mercy have the final word. And where renewal is always, by God’s grace, not just possible but probable.

Steve is probably dead by now. But his story, his presence, his spirit of renewal is alive in my heart and I will always cherish. May we always be drawn together in hope and peace not just this Advent Season, but in every season, whatever befalls us.

Thanks be to God, Amen.