

More life to come (Isaiah 11:1-10)

A magnificent tree is reduced to a stump. But it's still alive.

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Nestled into Hadrian's Wall at the northern edge of England, the elegant Sycamore Gap tree rose from a dip between two hills. Its dramatic setting made it one of the most photographed trees in the country, featured in calendars and guidebooks and postcards. Day hikers posed in front of the tree for selfies; couples said their vows beneath its branches; Kevin Costner and Morgan Freeman strolled around it in *Robin Hood Prince of Thieves*.

On a windy night in September 2023, vandals came to Sycamore Gap with a chainsaw. The tree, which took over a century to grow, fell in minutes. The nation awoke to an icon chopped down for no apparent reason. Thousands who loved it reacted with anger and sorrow, confusion and lament. The tree's tall trunk and graceful branches were trucked away to be turned into furniture and memorial art, leaving only a stump behind.

And yet, the following spring, the Northumberland National Park Authority placed an astonishing sign where the tree once stood: "This tree stump is still alive." Park foresters fenced off the stump and marked it with hopeful words. "If we leave it alone it might sprout new growth," the sign continued. "Please respect the barrier."

They were right. Over the next few months, eight tiny clusters of shoots emerged around the base of the stump. An English sycamore is in fact a species of maple, and it usually grows from a winged seed. But when this tree is cut down, it sometimes reproduces asexually, sprouting a genetic clone of the original tree from its roots. Where the Sycamore Gap tree had once risen nearly 50 feet high, the new shoots were just a couple small leaves, a few centimeters tall. But they were unquestionably alive.

Scholars disagree about what kind of deforestation Isaiah's community faced. Many see his stump as a commentary on the disappointing eighth-century BCE kings of Judah, failing to bear fruit and cutting down God's word. Others think these verses were written after the sixth-century exile and inserted into Isaiah's early chapters to describe the Babylonian armies that struck Judah like a vandal's axe, splintering families and clear-cutting the nation. In either case, when the people looked around, they saw the proud house of Jesse and his rugged sons reduced to nothing but a forlorn stump.

But along came Isaiah to post an unlikely sign among the wreckage: *This tree stump is still alive*. Give it time; respect the barrier. New life is still possible. God is here at work.

A shoot starts small. It requires patience and care. It doesn't germinate in the typical way. It might, for instance, take root in a virgin's womb. But it holds the potential that a nation yearns for: a sign that all is not, after all, destroyed. Out of devastation, one will emerge who will restore and renew all creation. There is life yet to come.

This Advent, it's our turn to post signs in neighborhoods, relationships, churches, and nations that look, to all appearances, beyond hope. Like the prophets, we proclaim that what looks most dead might yet be alive. A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse. Wait. Watch. It will grow.