Messiah – our Lord, Jesus Christ – who would be born about 600 years later:

“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.” +++ So begins this part of Isaiah’s prophecy, which Christians believe foretells the coming of the Messiah – our Lord, Jesus Christ – who would be born about 600 years later: “A shoot… from the stump of Jesse.” +++ Sometimes we think of that language as just a poetic way of saying this coming savior would be a descendent of David – and it definitely is poetic – even the English translation of the original Hebrew is beautiful… but it’s not just that. These images are telling us something specific about the coming Savior –+++ So, this morning, I’d like to unpack these things with you – and see if there are kernels of the message that resonate with us, in our time, in this Advent message, as we wait for the arrival of Christ.

“A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse.” +++ Jesse was an OUTSIDER if there ever was one. We read in 1 Samuel that he was a farmer and shepherd in the small out-of-the-way village of Bethlehem, a little over 5 miles away from Jerusalem. Jesse had 8 sons. I can imagine how surprised Samuel was when God sent him to find Israel’s great king there, in Bethlehem, among Jesse’s sons. And then, Jesse only brought out 7 of them. He didn’t even call his youngest son, David, in from the fields to meet Samuel. Why bother? – That boy could never be a king. But Samuel insisted, so Jesse sent for his youngest son – hardly older than a boy – with beautiful eyes and ruddy skin. An outsider among outsiders, that son, whose own father hadn’t called him in to meet the prophet – that son, David – was chosen by God to become the greatest king that Israel would ever know. Under his leadership, the young kingdom expanded, overwhelming its neighbors on every side. +++ God called David “a man after my own heart,” and God promised that his throne would be established forever. +++ The Lord didn’t choose from among the wealthy or the famous or the powerful, and didn’t have to… because even the lowest among us has the potential to bless the world.

But things change. By the time Isaiah wrote, almost 300 years had passed since David had become king… The world can change a lot in 300 years. Think about how different our world is from 300 years ago:: This church was 71 years old and Rev. Nathaniel Huntting was serving as its second pastor. New York was one of 13 British colonies. Many of the economic and political problems that led to our own Revolutionary War hadn’t happened yet. George Washington wouldn’t be born for 13 more years. The French and Indian War was still 35 years away… Great leaders have come and gone since then – replaced by others, who also disappeared after their own hour upon the stage. +++ Well, the same thing happened in the Ancient Near East. After David and his son, Solomon, Israel declined. 40 years after David’s death, the United Kingdom of Israel split into the Northern Kingdom of Israel and the Southern Kingdom of Judah. About 200 years after that, the Northern Kingdom had been conquered by Assyria. It was dispersed and disappeared from the world stage. Now, Judah is in a state of decline and is less than a century from falling to the Babylonians. +++ Compared to its enemies, the great, powerful, promising line of David had indeed become a stump – a relic – little more than the memory of a promise made long ago. +++ But Isaiah remembered God’s promise that the line of David would produce a king forever: “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…” And Isaiah foresaw that this king would be a champion of peace: “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 the little child shall lead them.” +++ But even the great prophet didn’t know just how, or when, or under what circumstances this king… this Messiah… would arise …+++ or just how great and eternal he would really be.

And now we move forward in history again. The Babylonian exile. The return to Jerusalem 70 years later… rebuilding the temple… carving out a new line of kings overshadowed by a world dominated by superpowers. But these kings weren’t in David’s line. They were a priestly class of Levites – the Hasmoneans – also called the Maccabees. The Pharisee and the Sadducee sects became influential in Judah. +++ Greece rose to dominance – and declined. Then the Roman Empire took over Palestine, along with most of the known world. +++ The Jewish King Herod was subservient to the Romans and became very wealthy – at the expense of his fellow Jews, who hated him. Herod had none of David’s blood in his veins. +++ The only hope the people had was to remember the ancient prophecies – prophecies of Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and others – prophecies of a new king who would arise… a Messiah… in the line of David… who would somehow turn all of this upside down.+++ Maybe it would be someone born in the house of Caesar… or an aristocrat… or a military general…+++ someone with connections – some INSIDER who knew how to make the wheels of this world turn in their favor.

And that’s where today’s Gospel lesson picks up. God is doing something NEW, something unexpected. And as usual – the Lord is working through an OUTSIDER. +++ Before the Messiah comes, Isaiah had written, there would be “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness: ‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.’” +++ John the Baptist seemed an unlikely source of that voice, roaming the wilderness, dressed in clothing of camel’s hair with a leather belt, eating nothing but locusts and wild honey. John was a zealot – the kind of person the authorities really didn’t like – and he was preaching a new message: repentance – baptism and the confession of sins. … And people were coming to him from Jerusalem and all Judea. +++ It must have been a shock to the Pharisees and Sadducees when this wild man from the wilderness rejected them (of all people) in today’s reading:: “You brood of vipers!,” John said to them. “Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come?... I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire!”

And then there was Jesus – the one John prepared the way for – the one who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire, – He was the final fulfillment of God’s promise that David’s throne would be established forever. +++ “From the stump of Jesse…” And by this time, after everything that’s happened – everything we’ve been talking about – Jesse’s great family tree truly was no more than a stump… +++ “A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots.” +++ But this shoot – this Messiah – wouldn’t appear as anyone would expect:: He was the ULTIMATE OUTSIDER. >> with peasant parents who couldn’t even provide a bed indoors where he could be born. A new kind of king, who came into this world in a manger, surrounded by animals and visited by shepherds. This king in the line of David, as Paul declares in our epistle reading… this king is for the whole world. “Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him… the root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.” +++ Not hope in the devices of this world – politics, military power, … money – no, that’s the kind of hope that will be a distant memory in a couple hundred years when the world has changed. This king IS the change in the world – and through faith – through love – through peace – through salvation – his reign will never end.

David – John – Jesus:: all outsiders – coming from humble backgrounds to bless the world through the extravagant love of God. +++ And do you know what? We need these outsiders! We need Isaiah’s reminder that the child we celebrate is the fulfillment of divine promise. We need John the Baptist to show up during Advent in his hairy shirt and loud voice, calling us to repent before the arrival the one who follows him – the one who baptizes with fire. We need Jesus Christ, our Lord and Savior, to show us the ways of love – to usher in the kingdom of God – to give us the gift of salvation. +++ And, we need to be reminded the GOOD NEWS that God uses outsiders to bless the world in the most unlikely ways – often in small ways – and through the most unlikely people:: people you might look right past, without even noticing them:: – outsiders… sitting, perhaps, on the edge of a busy sidewalk with nowhere else to go – outsiders recently released from jail, having paid their debt to society but with no opportunities to make it on their own – outsiders desperately looking for daily labor, so they might send money home to their struggling families – outsiders who are marginalized and bullied by communities that judge them for whom they love, for what pronouns they are most comfortable with, or the difficult personal choices they make for their families. +++ The second week of Advent reminds us to look for the coming Lord in everyone we meet – to look for how the Holy Spirit is working in them and using them to touch the lives around them, including our own. +++ But, just as importantly – know that if your God does such wonderful work through the most humble of circumstances:: – through a helpless child born among the animals – through a shepherd boy whose own father didn’t bother to call him from the fields to meet a great prophet – through an eccentric preacher driven into the wilderness to proclaim the beginning of a new age, … +++ if your God does such wonderful work through these:: what might God yet do through YOU?? +++ Look inward… Where is the Holy Spirit working on you these days? What kind of responses – what kind of nudges – do you get when you pray? Who is the Lord calling you to BE tomorrow and the next day? +++ Does it sound like a heavy lift? Do you feel like you don’t know what to do first? Do you often feel like an OUTSIDER in a world full of insiders? +++ GOOD! That’s the perfect place to start!

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.