

**EVOLVING EMMANUEL**  
Randall Tremba  
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Second Sunday in Advent  
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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**Isaiah 11:1-10**

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

Maybe you've seen something like that in a forest—a fallen tree, decaying, apparently dead. But you look closer and see a living shoot or branch growing out of it.

Sometimes nations and peoples and institutions seem as good as dead, decaying like an old fallen tree trunk. And then something sprouts, such as a Nelson Mandela.

Nelson Mandela died this past Thursday. The world mourns although you can be sure, off-camera, some rejoice.

Good riddance, some are saying because when “the last become first and the first become last” you can be sure not everybody's happy. Many people happily conform to the old world. Many are comfortable with things just as they are and would like to keep things that way!

To be sure, Mandela did not transform South Africa into an entirely new world, a nation completely at peace. It may be closer than it once was, but many South Africans are bitter over broken promises and dashed hopes. Violence and inequality still thrive in South Africa.

Still the dream of “peace on earth” lives on.

We still long for the day when “lion and lamb lie down together” but in the world we know, if lion and lamb lie down together it will be, more often than not, with the lamb laying inside the lion's stomach. Predators abound. The innocent and defenseless are abused and exploited.

That's the way of the old world. Violence and revenge seem unstoppable and irreversible.

And then along comes a child of South Africa, a “branch” out of the tribe of Xhosa. Along comes a man who stuns the world by embracing those who tortured and tormented him and his people. He includes a prison guard at his inauguration and his archenemies in the councils of his government. He works for reconciliation not retaliation.

For a child of peace to emerge out of the violent, racist roots of South African culture in the 20<sup>th</sup> century was as unlikely as a child of peace emerging out of the violent, racist roots of Jesse, which is to say the house of Israel, 2000 years ago. This past Friday as I read Isaiah's vision proclaimed 600 years before the birth of Jesus, I had Nelson Mandela on my mind.

*A branch shall grow out from the stump of Jesse. The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; but with justice he shall judge the poor.*

*The wolf shall live with the lamb, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. They will not hurt or destroy on my holy mountain. On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.*

He shall stand as a “signal.”

Today, Nelson Mandela stands as a signal, a sign of new possibilities to and for the peoples and nations of the earth. The story's been proclaimed from the mountaintop of global television.

If you watched the coverage following Mandela's death, you heard a certain question coming up over and over. *What was it about Mandela that enabled him to endure 27 years of imprisonment while maintaining hope and cleansing himself of resentment and hatred? How did he do that?*

One commentator said this; another that; until one said, somewhat sheepishly: *I believe he had a Christ-like spirit.*

What is that?

Well, the Christ-like spirit is more than Jesus. It's older than Jesus. And it's never left; so it can't come back except as a figure of speech, as a way of saying the story of the Christ-like spirit isn't finished on this planet. It's still unfolding like the story of evolution. Ilya Delio, author of *Christ in Evolution* puts it this way:

*We can read the history of our 13.7 billion year old universe as the rising up of Divine Love incarnate, which bursts forth in the person of Jesus, who reveals love's urge toward wholeness through reconciliation, mercy, peace and forgiveness. Jesus is the love of God incarnate, who shows the way of evolution toward unity in love.*

In other words, Jesus is a kind of “prototype” and icon of what humanity may yet become. May.

Evolution has never been automatic. It is not a straight line. It is not pre-determined. It responds to choices species make, however great or small. We can't control the outcome of evolution; but we can cooperate with its inner spirit.

Mandela cooperated. He made a choice to be a certain kind of person in a violent world. It's the kind of choice that a certain voice bids us make. (Matthew 3:1-12)

*In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea. "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near. Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."*

Repent. Turn away from hatred and fear. Turn toward love and faith. Prepare the way for the arrival. The Kin-dom of God is near. Choices can be made.

So what if “Emmanuel” is no longer a singular individual biding time in a celestial palace waiting Judgment Day?

What if “Emmanuel” is humanity itself evolving—full of promise and possibilities—waiting to arise or arrive, the divine not above or beyond us but as the potential surging within us? Emmanuel. God—not above or beyond but *with*.

What if Emmanuel is the divine impulse within this on-going creation contingent on choices we make, including those hard choices to forgive, to reconcile rather than hate and destroy?

On this second Sunday of advent we light the candles of hope and peace. We hope that lion and lamb will indeed lie down together, side by side. And why not: we've already seen signs of that possibility.

Open your eyes. Sprouts of compassion are springing forth in many places today, from ordinary lives and within many nations. If you're only looking to the house of Israel, or for the return of Jesus in the sky, or to a singular Emmanuel you're going to miss what's arriving, evolving right in front of your eyes and in your own heart—tender sprouts of hope and peace growing out of what you thought was dead, decaying and beyond hope.

As Julian of Norwich put it: *Betwixt God and me there is no between.*

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HYMN: "O Come, O Come, Emmanuel"