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Title: Making Room

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Text: [Jeremiah 33:14-16](#)

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No recording this week.



It is the First Sunday of Advent and a new liturgical church year begins. Our sanctuary looks wonderfully different as we begin to mark this season. We've had to move some things around to make room for decorations and symbols of the season. Perhaps you are doing the same thing at home. Moving things around to make room. This first

Sunday in the Christian year is designated "Hope Sunday." You'll be able to track the Sundays as we add banners behind the choir each week. Hope is a good place to begin a journey.

Advent invites us to look forward to God acting on our behalf, not only in the present but in the future. It invites us to put our trust in the God who makes and fulfills promises. At both campuses this Advent season, we will consider how our lives and our church can become a house where the Holy will be born anew, opening doors ever wider to those seeking shelter from the onslaught of life. We will discover how the prophets call us to care for our neighbors and "make room in the inn," as the spaces within us are filled with the light of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love.

Many congregations around the world begin this journey, as we did this morning, by singing in the medieval hymn "O come, O come, Emmanuel - and ransom captive Israel." While the hymn references the exile of Israel, it also invites us to look longingly toward the coming of the Christ child - "until the son of God appear" it says. But it doesn't end with the coming of the Christ child. That is a past event, and Advent continues to point us forward into the future. The word "advent," by definition, is forward-looking - looking to the arrival of someone or something. So, on this first Sunday of Advent, we begin a journey that will take us from anticipation to fulfillment in the coming of the Christ child and seek to discover how we can be changed by his arrival.

Chaim Potok begins his novel *In the Beginning*, with these words: "All beginnings are hard. I can remember my mother murmuring those words

while I lay in bed with a fever. Children are often sick, darling. That's the way it is with children. All beginnings are hard. You'll be all right soon." ¹

Whether it is the beginning of life, with all its fragility, the beginning of marriage with all its risk, or the beginning of a new job, with all its challenges, all beginnings are hard. This is true also of a new church year. As we begin the story of Jesus' life anew, we acknowledge our need and our heartache. All beginnings are hard, but there is hope. It is just such hope that is contained in the scripture from Jeremiah. It is one of seven so-called "oracles of hope" in this chapter alone. While not all from the same historical period, they all reflect the same conviction of the Jeremiah tradition -- the God who plucks up can also replant, the God who tears down can also rebuild, the God who nullifies can also do a new thing.

To set the stage of the scripture, this particular section of Jeremiah's prophecy is spoken to address a dire situation. The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, are advancing on Jerusalem. The streets of Jerusalem will soon be filled with the corpses of her people and the prophet Jeremiah himself is imprisoned by King Zedekiah. Start reading back up at verse one of this chapter and you'll get the details.

The worst has not yet happened, but it is inevitable. Any reasonable person can see that the city is doomed. Jeremiah's many prophecies of judgment, prophecies that have landed him in prison, are coming true. Yet now, amid catastrophe, the prophet finally speaks words of promise! In the previous chapter, he has purchased a piece of land, a foolish thing to do in a country soon to be conquered by invading armies. Nevertheless, he has purchased the land as a pledge, as the earnest of God's redemption: "For thus says the LORD of hosts, the God of Israel: Houses and fields and vineyards shall again be bought in this land" (Jeremiah 32:15). With doom and gloom knocking on the door, a sign of hope is on the horizon.²

Now, in chapter 33, the prophet speaks of the coming restoration, the restoration of normal life. There will come a time in the land of Judah when "there shall once more be heard the voice of mirth and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom and the voice of the bride, the voices of those who sing, as they bring thank offerings to the house of the Lord..." (Jeremiah 33:10-11).

And now, in this passage, Jeremiah speaks of the restoration not simply of daily life, as momentous as that is, but also of one of the chief signs of God's favor, the restoration of the Davidic line. A righteous Branch will sprout from the line of David. You hear this same language and image on Christmas Eve from Isaiah. "A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch

shall grow out of his roots." (Isaiah 11:1). The image is one of hope and unexpected joy: new life springing up from what looks like a dead stump.

One of the chief tragedies of the Babylonian Exile was the end of the Davidic dynasty. For nearly four hundred years, descendants of David had occupied the throne of Judah, and God had promised that it would always be so (2 Samuel 7; Psalm 89). But the Babylonians destroyed David's city, burned Solomon's temple, and took David's heirs into exile. The promises of God seemed to have come to an end.

To a people devastated by loss, Jeremiah's prophecy offered hope: "The days are surely coming, says the LORD, when I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and the house of Judah." (Jeremiah 33:14). All might seem lost, but God still is faithful. The house of David might be cut down, but God can bring life out of death. A branch will sprout.

Historically, the Davidic line did not return to the throne, so passages like this were, over time, interpreted to be speaking about the coming ideal ruler, the Messiah. The descendant of David who will "execute justice and righteousness in the land" is the one for whom we wait in this Advent season. And his salvation encompasses not just Judah and Jerusalem, but the whole world.

Such is the word of promise and hope in this text. I acknowledge, that like Jeremiah, we speak these words in a time when many are experiencing great loss: community, civility, work, security. While there are no invading armies on the doorstep, at least not in our immediate neighborhood, many resonate with the fear and hopelessness of Jeremiah's original audience.

A righteous Branch will spring up. It is a word of hope, but not naïve hope. Jeremiah is not someone who looks at the world through rose-colored glasses. This is a prophet imprisoned by his government because he keeps prophesying doom. A righteous Branch will spring up. Maybe so, but that saving act of God is not readily apparent in Jeremiah's or Judah's current situation. They are busy dreading the imminent arrival of enemy armies. A righteous Branch will spring up. This word of tenacious hope is spoken to counteract all the life-sapping, despair-inducing evidence to the contrary. And that is its power.

I try my best not to use sports analogies in sermons because I know some of you couldn't give a hoot about sports. Today, I'm going to veer from my rule for just a moment and I'll give as much explanation as I can so you don't need to know much about sports to understand the illustration. Indianapolis has a professional football team called the Indianapolis Colts.

When they play at home they play downtown at Lucas Oil Stadium but last Sunday, they played in Buffalo, New York – Orchard Park actually, but it's a Buffalo suburb. They beat the Buffalo Bills handily – 41-15. The head coach of the Colts is Frank Reich, who by the way was a high school friend of my wife, Ruth. OK, not a friend but a classmate. Well, not exactly a classmate but they did go to the same high school and their pictures are in the same yearbook.

What some do not know is that Reich served as president of Reformed Theological Seminary's Charlotte campus from 2003 to 2006 and pastored a church before becoming an NFL assistant coach in 2008. In last Sunday's post-game news conference stood at the podium and recited a verse from a popular Christian song, saying he wanted to give hope to those who are struggling in life. He quoted the same song in a postgame press conference in 1993 when he played quarterback for Buffalo and led the Bills to a historic 41-38 comeback victory over Houston after trailing 35-3. It remains the largest comeback win in NFL history.³

On Sunday, Reich said he rarely discusses his faith during press conferences but "wanted to offer a word of encouragement" to "anyone out there who is in the midst of a struggle." He said he had a "few friends in mind." "I want to give a personal account of where I've found my strength for the journey."

I want you to hear the clip for yourself. [Watch here](#).

The same proclamation is given today to us. We are inheritors of Jeremiah's task. We are called to speak a word of hope and promise in a world often filled with fear and uncertainty, even despair, AND in times when things are good – Reich had just won that game. Especially in this season of Advent, we speak words of hope. Amid despair, hope erupts. After long waiting, a branch will sprout. The complete fulfillment of God's promises has not yet happened, but it is coming. Such is Advent faith, and Advent hope.

From the dead stump of a dynasty, God will raise a new branch of hope, a mighty oak, a Messiah. The church has always seen the fulfillment of this hope in Jesus, the Messiah. For the Christian, the "days that are surely coming" spoken of by the prophets are coming again in Jesus. We find our salvation, our security, in Jesus, whom we acclaim as our shoot from the stump of Jesse. In this season, I invite you – I encourage you – to make room for two things. Make room for Jesus and make room for hope. Well, I guess that's one thing. Amen.

¹ Potok, Chaim. Novel, *In the Beginning*. Ballantine Books; First Ballantine Books Trade Paperback Edition (September 10, 1997). Page 3.

² Commentary help for this sermon from Commentary on Jeremiah 33:14-16 by Kathryn M. Schifferdecker, November 29, 2009 found at www.workingpreacher.org.

³ Information at postgame press conference found here:

<https://www.christianheadlines.com/contributors/michael-foust/colts-coach-recites-in-christ-alone-to-encourage-others-find-the-power-that-you-need-in-jesus.html>