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It's the turning of another year.

Our first Advent/Christmas in New Mexico reminds me of ten years ago, my family's first full year in Hong Kong and when the hot hot weather of May, June, July, August, September and October *finally* began to change and dip into the 60's in late November, and we were surprised to see all of Hong Kong suddenly wrapped in fur coats, big boots and turtle neck sweaters.

At the time I was a mission "tent-making" situation, teaching in a phonics center and my three and four year old students proudly showed me their new little gloves warming their fingers. Cute.

Strangely, when the weather finally got closer to the temperatures back home in the USA, I suddenly found myself struck by the winds of homesickness.

And yes here in New Mexico too, as the weather has gotten colder – I miss the autumn forests of red and gold. And I miss my 94 year old mother, back in Wisconsin, and oh, I miss our elder sons, who after coming for Thanksgiving – briefly – quickly left again, on the plane to San Francisco, on the highway to Denver.

And it's not only the living people that I miss...

With the colder temperatures here in Las Cruces, I am thinking of my father, long gone from this earth I remember how he loved the cold, and how he instilled in me a deep love for the season of Advent, which he would greet every year, by bringing fresh cut evergreen branches into the living room, filling the house with the smell of spruce.

I think some of you too have some of these experiences this time of year – a feeling of homesickness for some place or for someone, whether Las Cruces is your long time home or not, somehow the changing of a season speaks to a longing very deep in our souls.

And the ancient church, in its wisdom, has given us the gift of a liturgical calendar, in which the year actually begins today, with this first Sunday in Advent.

Just when in most of the world, the daylight hours are getting shorter, the weather colder, and the last bits of summer roses are brown on the vine.

And just when in the secular world, the Santa Clauses and store decorations and online ads would have you believe that *shopping* is going to be your salvation,

Or that finishing your Christmas list is really gonna give you the peace & contentment you so desperately want.

The Church Family says. WAIT. Watch. Even in the middle of your messy life, there is hope. Something new & different is about to begin.

In making sense of this promise, the Church reaches way back in time to words which are even more ancient than Christian tradition, the words of the prophet Jeremiah, speaking 100s of years before Christ:

“The days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will fulfill the good promise I made... in those days and at that time

I will make a righteous Branch sprout from David’s line.”

This promise, as first spoken, addressed one of the darkest of times of Israel’s history.

The armies of Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon are advancing on Jerusalem. The streets are about to be filled with corpses of Jerusalem’s own people.

The great promises of the dynasty of the House of David has just led to disappointment after disappointment. For nearly 400 years, descendants of David had been on the throne of Judah, but *where* is the great society people have been looking for? *Where* is the justice according to law, and the safety nets and care for the most disadvantaged? Where are the gardens Israel and Judah were supposed to enjoy, and the wedding feasts and family banquets that were going to be affordable by all?

The prophet Jeremiah himself is speaking from prison where he has been arrested for speaking truth to power. That’s what prophets do. That’s what got Jeremiah in trouble.

But into this bleak setting, we get chapters 31-33 of the Book of Jeremiah in our Bibles, chapters which are also known as the Little Book of Consolation, set within what is usually thought of as a prophet of doom and gloom, old man Jeremiah.

And from within this Little Book of Consolation, we come to the incredible sweetness of today's words.

In those days and at that time.... A righteous Branch will sprout...

He will do what is just and right in the land.

A legitimate branch... not like Zedekiah, last king of Judah who had been installed as a puppet king by Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon.

But the real deal. Someone who will change the world. And make goodness happen again.

I do not know what darkness in your life might reflect the darkness of this colder season of the year. Problems at work. No work. A promise not fulfilled. A family member who has passed away. Someone's relapse into an addiction you THOUGHT had been conquered. A hurtful word by someone you love.

Or more broadly – maybe you are angry about some of the darkneses of the political situation in our own country (not entirely unlike Jeremiah) – where laws are made but not enforced, where the rich get richer & can afford lawyers and lobbyists to protect their interests.

Maybe you get furious at inequalities or corruption in medical or pension systems

Or the school system and educational opportunities which seem always and everywhere to favor those who can pay the big bucks.

I saw it in Hong Kong as I looked at the difference between my students at the phonics center whose parents could afford to give them every advantage including semi-private lessons with a native English teacher [me] from the age of two...

and then on mission trips I saw kids roaming the streets of South Asian countries selling sweet jasmine necklaces while their drug crazed mom waited on the curb for her 5 and 6 year old kids to come back with crumpled bills handed out by guilty-feeling people in nice cars.

Or families in Cambodia who had to pay to use toilets. Their own homes had no bathrooms. And those were the lucky ones, who had a toilet near them. It's why I will always encourage giving to World Hunger, even though it's also important to give at home to local projects [Toys for Tots, etc.]

I've seen with my own eyes how, in Burma (Myanmar), China, Cambodia... the gift of animals and learning animal husbandry is the key difference between a family whose children can go to school and those children who work long hours in tea shops or in the fields... making bricks, one afternoon in northern Myanmar I watched young children, maybe 9, 10, 11 years old, who spent their days making bricks in the hot sun...

And into our world's brokenness, the Word of God speaks.

It's not just old man Jeremiah speaking anymore, Now it's the Lord and he's speaking to us.

A righteous branch is coming.

And the goodness of Jesus Christ has perfumed the whole world in which we live. Like the scent of spruce filled my childhood home in Advent.

And we, we hearers of this Word today get to take part in the relationships of goodness.

We get to take part in specific acts of justice and rightness and

We get to take part, ultimately, in the experience of joy, which this new Branch, this legitimate King Jesus will bring.

Advent. We look forward to the birth of Jesus the Savior, as if for the first time.

But we also look to that day when he will come again, and set *all* things right.

This is our hope. This is our faith. Amen.

Hymn of the Day: ELW 252 - Each Winter as the Year Grows Older