

Advent I

Cycle C, 11.28.21

Jeremiah 33:14-16/ 1 Thessalonians
3:12-4:2/Luke 21:25-28,34-36

FROM THE DEAD STUMP, A NEW BRANCH

There's so much more to these weeks of Advent than the external preparations we make for Christmas. There's an inner renovation to which the Word of God calls us as we begin this season. As we enter Advent, let's look to that preparation. I dislike most TV reality shows -- immensely. I don't understand how people want to expose themselves before an audience of tens of thousands. To me, it's just plain embarrassing. However, a few years ago there was one reality show on the food network that I enjoyed (and was disappointed when it was taken off the air): *Restaurant Impossible*.



Chef Robert Irvine goes to failing restaurants and helps them turn around. Here is a description from the show's website: *Turning around a failing restaurant is a daunting challenge under the best of circumstances. Attempting to do it in just two days with only \$10,000 may be impossible. But Chef Robert Irvine is ready to take on the challenge. He'll channel MacGyver and use a lot of muscle to rescue these desperate places from complete collapse. Can one man, in two days, with just \$10,000, turn the tide of a failing restaurant and pave the*

road to a successful future? Find out as Robert Irvine takes on Restaurant: Impossible.

What I liked about the show was pretty much everything. This seasoned chef comes in like a knight in shining armor and turns these restaurants around. From outdated décor to hip, new environment, from canned and frozen food to fresh, creative dishes, from sloppy waitpersons to service-oriented staff, Irvine overhauled the whole shebang with straight talk, great cooking skills, and a top team of contractors and designers.

I liked the part where they showed Chef Irvine, driving to the town where the restaurant is located—Memphis, TN; Aptos, CA; or Kansas City, MO. He talks about what he's going to try to find out and accomplish once he gets there. He only went to restaurants that invited him. And when he arrived, he expected them to be ready with their own litany of what's going well and what needs to change. Often there are problems that go beyond a rundown restaurant.

One episode showed a failing family-owned restaurant whose owner, the matriarch, was depressed after the loss of her husband and couldn't bring the energy to the job as she once did. Irvine helped the widow and her family work through their grief and take on a new focus and energy in honor of their husband and dad. The restaurant wasn't the only thing that had a turn-around; the whole family was transformed. The restaurateurs gained self-confidence, renewed energy for their work and their lives, an attitude of being the best for their customers, and new joy in living. Not a bad agenda for any of us as we

begin Advent.

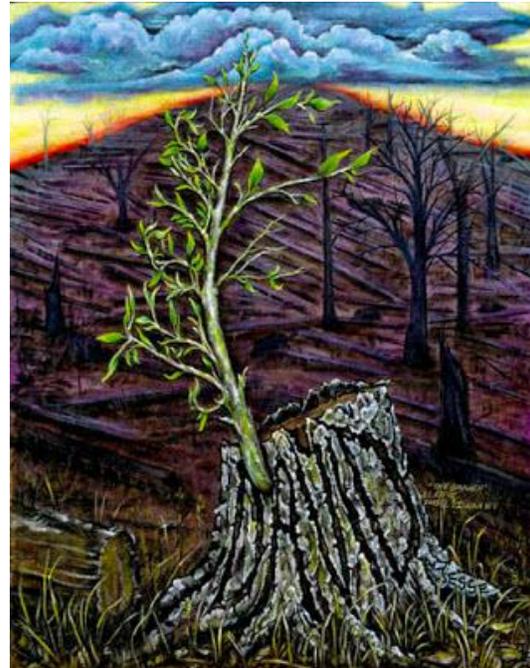
Robert Irvine is no Christ figure or John the Baptist, but there's an analogy here between our gospel text and this human example of a dramatic overhaul driven by someone who knows what he's doing. Our Advent overhaul is only possible, though, if we'll allow our premises to be placed under new management. That's what our Advent invitation is all about – preparing ourselves for someone who is coming and who, with our cooperation, can take the disasters that we've created in our lives and in our world, situations that seem impossible to be changed or improved, and turn them from failures into success, from darkness into light, from train wrecks on twisted tracks to moving down a road that is smooth and passable.



Unfortunately, unlike the transformations that take place in forty-eight hours on reality TV, the transformations in our lives don't happen overnight. Ours is the path of slow change, conversions that take time, sometimes a life-time. That's why the message of waiting, which is at the heart of this Advent Season, is crucial to our faith and to our daily living.

First, waiting keeps us looking forward, facing the future. This is the implicit message, and the hope, contained in the Old Testament reading today. Jeremiah tells the Israelites, while they are stuck in a 70-year long

wait in Babylon, that God isn't finished with them yet. Even in their seemingly endless exile, even though their once-proud tree of David's dynasty had been cut down by the Babylonians, God had nurtured a small, frail shoot of new future growth out of that stump. It was a sign of hope that new possibilities lay ahead, growing miraculously out of the cut-off despair of the past.



A small frail baby, born to poor parents in a stable in the backwater village of Bethlehem, didn't seem like grand entrance for God to make into the world. But God seldom shouts. Mostly God whispers. Because hope isn't born out of loud displays, but from quiet signs of possibility, held close to the heart. And the incubator of hushed expectation is waiting. It can't be microwaved or hurried. Waiting gives us the opportunity to slow down, turn down the inner noise, and pay attention to small things—like shoots of new growth, a Christmas cactus slowly blooming or a baby's cooing. We are hard-wired for hope, made by God to

lean into the future with faith and trust, believing that the best is always yet to be, secured by the God who beckons us forward.

Second, if we had nothing to look forward to, our lives would lose their discipline and purpose. Hard to believe, but it's true that waiting and hoping keep us on our toes, keep us alert to new possibilities, and keep us on a journey toward a destination. Without such hope, cut off from a sense of the future, our existence would spiral down in despair, or be wasted in sloppy living. The New Testament readings, from both the epistle and the Gospel, underline this truth. Waiting is good for us. It keeps us pointed ahead. Waiting keeps us from becoming trapped in the past or the present. We endure the frustrations and inconveniences life brings us because we know that something wonderful awaits us.



To be fully alive, to become fully the person God created you to be, you and I have to learn to cherish a sense of expectation. It's this hope that keeps us from giving up when the present moment is dark. It's this hope that will strengthen us as we face all the ongoing challenges of the pandemic. It's this hope that frees us from the tyranny of our past and opens us up to the limitless possibilities of God's continued "yes."



So, this Advent, when you're stuck in traffic again, or on 'hold' listening to the bland music of the telephone answering service, use that rare waiting moment as a gift from God to exercise your muscles of hope. It's in those moments that God just might be trying to get your attention to help you in your inner renovation.

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