

HAVING A GREEN THUMB  
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King City United Church  
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We have had some interesting weather recently. We had some wonderful January days, but it is not January. Other days were more like spring than fall and the beginning of winter. On those days, my thoughts went to seeding and planting rather than raking and shoveling.

Do you have a green thumb? What a green thumb God has! The whole world is God's creation, each and every part. Creation is teeming with growth and life. Sometimes we are surprised by what we find in the most unsuspected places. Even in the desert there is life. From a stump, a seemingly dead stump, God brought forth life. From the stump of Jesse's line, from the stump of David's people, where death had long dwelt, where the possibilities did not look fertile, God grew a branch, a twig, and from that small beginning came hope, hope for a hopeless people, hope for peace, peace which would overcome fear and vulnerability and threat, justice for the meek and the poor.<sup>i</sup> Goodness and faithfulness would flourish and bear much fruit. What a green thumb God has!

Advent is a kind of ambiguous and sometimes confusing season. On the one hand, we hear prophecies about the coming of the Messiah and we read the stories of Christmas about his arrival. On the other hand, we read prophecies of the second coming of the Messiah,<sup>ii</sup> and so we get somewhat lost between memory and hope in the in-between times. Nonetheless, we also expect another coming today. We believe and understand that Christ is here now through the Holy Spirit and enters each life in sometimes subtle, sometimes dramatic, ways but always bringing life and growth, peace and hope, joy and love. We prepare for a new world opening to us now through the creative green thumb of God.

This new world, however, will not come to fruition automatically or by osmosis. John the Baptist in today's Gospel lesson invites us to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."<sup>iii</sup> It is an invitation to make concrete decisions that will reorder our life in ways appropriate to God's creative intentions. It is an invitation to have a green thumb.

How do we prepare for God's arrival today in our lives and participate in God's creative actions? The first way is to recognize the seeds that God has already planted, to recognize the opportunities around us. I read somewhere once that a pessimist is someone who hears opportunity

knocking and complains about the noise. Hopeful people hear opportunity knocking and seize those opportunities to make seeds of hope bloom into reality.

A story is told about a fellow named Jim who was driving home one afternoon from a school crafts fair. When he stopped at a stop sign, he had to wait while an elderly gentleman crossed in front of him. The old man was bent over and made only slow, laboured progress. Open to an opportunity Jim made a quick decision. He pulled his car over to the side of the road and reached into the back seat for a box of cookies he had just bought.

As he pursued the man up the street, the man became alarmed. He turned and shook his fist to defend himself. "Don't be afraid," Jim said. "I don't mean to harm you, only to give you a gift." "Why?" the man asked, his eyes welling up with tears. "Because it's Christmas and I love you." As the old man accepted the cookies, Jim felt tears in his eyes as well. "I was overcome with emotion for this stranger," he said. "That moment captured the true meaning of Christmas for me."<sup>iv</sup>

Now, contrast that story with this one.

In a letter to the Editor some years ago, a man described an incident that happened during a snowfall. A woman skidded her car into a ravine on Bathurst at Major Mackenzie. She wasn't hurt, but while other drivers slowed to see what had happened no one stopped to offer help as she trudged through the snow drifts and up the road to get help. The author ended by saying, "I am left with an agonizing question. If I had been there, would I have stopped? The driver was my mother," he said.<sup>v</sup>

Two opportunities, one taken, one not. There are seeds around us that need nurturing. In responding to those opportunities, we prepare for Christ's arrival, indeed through our response Christ arrives.

Secondly, we can make opportunities happen by being alert to the possibilities. Of the Messiah Isaiah said, "He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear."<sup>vi</sup> The Messiah will see deeper than appearances and understand beyond what is heard, and so can we when we look around us with our heart, when we look through the lens of goodness and love. We can prepare our own gardens, plant our own seeds, turn possibilities into opportunities.

For most of us, Christmas is a time for family and friends. Yet, we all have a sense that Christmas is more than that. The birth of Christ united all people into one family and brought peace to those of goodwill.<sup>vii</sup> In the epistle reading for today from Romans 15, Paul argues for the inclusion of

Gentiles into a Jewish church. "Welcome one another, therefore, as Christ has welcomed you."<sup>viii</sup> There is a sense of joy which like fire leaps within us and desires to spread to those we love and beyond to others. We can take advantage of that feeling of joy. Indeed, it is our opportunity to do so.

Suppose, for example, that you looked around you at the circumstances of others you know. What needs present themselves to you? What needs can you plan to meet? Why not pick a "secret friend"? Someone, a friend or acquaintance or family member, to whom you can be a friend without them knowing it. Think of some way you can help them, some way you can bring a little joy into their daily lives, some way you can plant seeds of hope for their futures.

Spend some time with a child, a grandchild or niece or nephew. Listen to them. That's something many children seldom have, someone to listen to them.

Clean house for someone less physically able than you are.

Invite someone to lunch. Take someone to Church. Invite some of the excluded to your Christmas activities.

Ponder that for a while. Ponder what you might be able to do for someone you know that would bring hope and joy into their lives, that would bring the presence of Christ to them.

And think beyond those you know. How might you help someone you don't know and might never meet but who needs you and what you can do?

For quite a few years now, newspaper cartoonists have devoted one day to raising awareness to world hunger through their cartoons. One year in the *Mary Worth* cartoon, Toby was in Mary's kitchen reading the newspaper. The front-page headline read, "Gunman slays two in holdup." "I don't understand, Mary!" said Toby. "With all the other problems in the world, why worry about hunger?" "Because," Mary replied, "There is a distinct relationship between hunger and an orderly society, Toby!" Social commentator and theologian Reinhold Niebuhr wrote, "If you want peace, work for justice." "Love and business and family and religion and art and patriotism are nothing but shadows of words when a [person] is starving," wrote American writer O. Henry.

How might we turn shadows of words into rays of sunshine encouraging and nurturing seeds of hope? Today is White Gift Sunday in many churches. Is there something we could have done today? Should this have been our White Gift Sunday, an opportunity to sow seeds? A while ago, I suggested that we bring gifts of food on the first Sunday of

every month for the food bank. When we remember to do so, we sow seeds of hope for families caught between cheques. What other things might you, might we, do to help economically deprived families, children and parents, and singles with seeds of hope through our caring?

Two things come together at this time of year. One is the largest expenditure of money through the year. Some say we catch the disease of “affluenza” as we spend tens of billions of dollars in North America. The other is Giving Tuesday, which passed this week, and the end of the taxation year when we are bombarded more than usual by requests of donations. Why not bring those two together and think about some other ways to spend our money? Why not spend a little more on charitable activities and a little less on ourselves? An organization dedicated to ending the commercialization of Christmas suggested some years ago that people should give 25% of what they normally spend on Christmas to charities and to the missions of their church. Think about that.

The Advent and Christmas season is a wonderful time of year for most. A time when we celebrate the great gift of God in Christ through whom the creative energies of God brought peace and joy and love and hope. We can celebrate this time by participating in God’s creativity, by having green thumbs that plant and nurture the seeds of hope in the deserts around us. Ponder these things in your heart. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> Isaiah 11: 1-10.

<sup>ii</sup> Readings about the Second Coming are usually read for the First Sunday of Advent.

<sup>iii</sup> From the Gospel reading for the Second Sunday of Advent, Matthew 3: 1-12.

<sup>iv</sup> Jo Robinson and Jean Coppock Staeheli, *Unplug the Christmas Machine*, Quill Press (1982), pp. 121-122.

<sup>v</sup> Robert Clement (Newmarket), “Good Samaritans gone with first snow,” *Toronto Star* (December 5, 1986).

<sup>vi</sup> Isaiah 11: 3.

<sup>vii</sup> Luke 2: 14, alternative reading for the Second Sunday of Advent.

<sup>viii</sup> From the Epistle reading for the Second Sunday of Advent, Romans 15: 4-13.