

We don't have control over many things: what people say behind our backs; the weather; who moves into the house next door; viruses; who your parents are; the price of groceries; other drivers; and so on. We can control some things – how we spend our day, what attitude we hold, and whom we keep as friends. But many uncontrollable things happen. Some you brush off, but others are irritating: if your supervisor makes your work harder, and you get no reward; or if your employer lays you off; or if the item you were going to purchase last week costs twice as much this week; or – God forbid – if you live under a political dictatorship.

Israel faced that problem in the days of Jeremiah. Their city had been pillaged. People were forced into slavery. Many others were killed. And the new leader was living large. People felt helpless. But they knew about their ancestors, that God once gave them a great ruler, a king named David. In those days they had a strong army, safe cities, abundant food, and something more: a king they liked, a king who provided for those who had less, a king who had faults but was a man of God. David defined a people and an age. But after him, things changed, and people longed for that kind of leader again. They wanted another David.

Jeremiah the prophet prayerfully discerned God's will and announced it. People listened to him, but he was not always popular. On the First Sunday of Advent this year, the first reading comes from Jeremiah, and in this case he says something that was popular. He heard God say, "I will fulfill the promise I made to the house of Israel and Judah." The family tree of King David will leaf out a new shoot. This new shoot, this new descendent will be fair; "he will do what is right and just in the land." Israel had no control over this; people were helpless; they could not determine the character of a child in David's family. But God could. God promised them a new leader from the line of David who would set things right.

This is what Christians believe, and this is what Advent is all about. We believe that the one who fulfilled Jeremiah's prophecy is Jesus, born miraculously through the line of David as a ruler who would set things right – a just shoot. Ever since he came, his followers have done a lot of things right – we have advocated for the poor and the powerless, we have provided health care and education, we gather faithfully for worship, and we serve the needs of others because we believe that is what Christ wants us to do. But even though Christians have contributed to the development of the world, the world still suffers injustice, and we each face things over which we have no control, things that cry out for rescue.

That's why Jeremiah's prophecy still speaks to us, and why we set aside a season to hear it. God has promised to do what is right and just, and we await the fulfillment of that promise. Our hope is undimmed because of the advent of Jesus Christ.

So, yes, we all can imagine a life that would be better if God would control some of the things we cannot. But that's Advent – living in imperfection but believing in something good, and letting that belief bring to our troubled lives the gift of a joyful heart.