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Think back to the weather from this summer. What words would you use to describe it? ...

It was almost too hot and dry to be outside to do much of anything. I feel as though I missed out this summer on mowing the grass, pulling weeds, and the other kinds of outdoor things I enjoy doing. It was just too hot for much of anything to grow, even weeds—but in one corner of my yard, something began to sprout from the root of a tree. Since I hadn't mowed the grass since the beginning of the summer, this sprout that would have normally encountered the blades of my mower managed to survive. In the midst of the drought, new life began to emerge from the root of a tree, a place that did not normally sprout.

As I watched this sprout emerge and grow, the words from Jeremiah bloomed in my mind: "In those days and at that time, I will raise up a righteous branch from David's line, who will do what is just and right in the land. In those days, Judah will be saved and Jerusalem will live in safety" (33:15-16).

That may have sounded like wishful thinking to some who heard these words thousands of years ago, for the powerful nation of Babylon had sent its armies to surround the city of Jerusalem. Those living in

Judah had seen the northern portion of their nation of Israel overtaken by the Assyrians 135 years earlier, and now those living in the southern portion of Judah feared their homeland could be overrun the Babylonians.

Jeremiah had been thrown into prison for warning the king about the approaching danger, for his words must have sounded like treason to the king. But even while sitting in prison, Jeremiah tried to look hopeful as he purchased a piece of property from his cousin, trying to reassure everyone that all would be ok, that God had not forgotten them. I imagine some people might have seen Jeremiah's act as foolish, knowing that at any moment their life could change in unpredictable and destructive ways.

And yet, Jeremiah offered a long-term vision, of a sprout, a branch, that would emerge from the history of their people. He envisioned a leader who would come forth to bring justice and better relationships amongst people and nations.

Don't we long for the same thing today—that not only will relationships with our friends and family grow stronger, but that nations will learn to work together? This week cheers of celebration erupted in

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the part of the world where Jeremiah spoke thousands of years ago, echoing a longing of hope they have had for countless generations. News reports tell us that “Palestinians in the West Bank erupted in cheers, hugging each other and honking car horns. In the West Bank city of Ramallah, hundreds crowding into the main square waved Palestinian flags and chanted ‘God is great.’”<sup>1</sup>

What happened to prompt such a jubilant response? The United Nations voted this week to recognize a Palestinian state, 65 years after the U.N. had created the proposal for two separate states: one Jewish and one Arab. Arguments have been made on both sides of this proposal for the past six decades, but when the vote was taken, 138 nations voted in favor, with 9 voting against and 41 abstentions. This portion of the world has been in conflict for thousands of years, something Jeremiah had experienced when the Babylonians overtook this land. The people who lived there wanted some form of hope, just as the people who live there now long for hope that things will change. Could this be a new sprout of hope to calm the tensions?

As Christians, during this season of Advent, we anticipate a hope that sprouted forth about 500 years after Jeremiah spoke. The Babylonians were no longer in power, for they had been replaced by the Persians, then the Greeks, and then the Romans. This tiny portion of the world had been kicked around like a soccer ball, and people longed for another sprout of hope. But this time the hope did not arise in a military leader, but in the sprout of a new baby planted in the midst of all the turmoil. As Christians, we wait with anticipation and hope again for the birth of Jesus, knowing that God entered the world through this amazing birth.

Many today seek some form of hope in their daily lives—maybe just a smile from a stranger, a kind word heard while standing in line to pay for groceries, or a wave from the neighbor while getting the morning paper or mail. But for those who experience rejection day after day, it may be hard to find hope, which is something that Jia wanted to prepare himself for through what he called Rejection Therapy. How many of you have found your hope decrease as you encounter rejection?

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He described his plan as “to have one rejection per day by making crazy requests. My goal is to desensitize myself from the pain of rejection and overcome my fear.”<sup>2</sup> He carried a hidden camera in order to post his experiences on an online blog. The first day he asked a stranger to borrow \$100, which received the anticipated rejection. On day two he ordered a hamburger at a fast-food place, and after eating it, he asked for a free burger refill. Once again, he heard “no.”

But on day three, something surprising happened. He walked into a donut place and asked a woman to make five interlinking donuts into the shape of the Olympic symbol. Jia expected an immediate “no,” but the woman pondered how she might accomplish the task. She looked up the five-circle design online and, although she did not interlock the donuts, she made a very good replica of the Olympic symbol. Jia was stunned. Only three days into his project of trying to get a rejection each day, Jackie at the donut shop gave

him hope that people really do strive to help one another.

When he went back on day 12 to visit Jackie again and thank her, she instead thanked him for the challenge to do something creative and artistic. Somehow in Jia’s journey to seek rejection, instead great hope was planted, as a sprout emerging from the ground. The video of the conversation between Jia and Jackie has gone viral, meaning it has spread across the Internet, bringing hope all over the world as people have posted their comments about this surprising encounter.

I offer a suggestion for our four weeks of Advent—that we find ways of offering surprising hope, ways that could change the life of someone near you, which could possibly even ripple across the globe in amazing ways. For as we approach Christmas, we anticipate the surprising way that God enters the world, not only through the birth of a small baby 2000 years ago, but through each of us in the way we bring hope to one another.

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<sup>1</sup> Palestinian 'state' not real until peace with Israel, <http://www.usatoday.com/story/news/world/2012/11/29/un-votes-palestine/1735849/>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.entresting.com/blog/100-days-of-rejection-therapy/>