

The days are coming (Jeremiah 33:14-16)

We are surrounded by wastelands. God promises new life.

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Be alert; a righteous branch is springing up before our eyes.

A few miles from my home on the South Side of Chicago lie the remains of the old South Works steel mill. For more than a century, South Works employed thousands of people and provided steel beams for the city's skyscrapers. When the mill closed down in 1992, its buildings were demolished, save two massive concrete ore walls that dynamite could barely dent. For a decade, the site sat vacant, its soil contaminated by toxic slag.

But where potential private buyers for the land had seen only risk, the Chicago Park District saw opportunity. In 2002, the park district bought the South Works site and undertook an ambitious project to cover it in healthy topsoil. Once the land was healed, the planting began. Today, where the mill's ruins once stood, you'll find the sprawling nature preserve of Steelworkers Park. With native plants and spectacular views of Lake Michigan, this once-abandoned stretch of the city is now a destination for birders, stargazers, and picnicking families. In the spring, the park is a riot of prairie wildflowers. And those old ore walls? They have been converted into rock climbing walls, open to all.

When Jeremiah promises justice to the people of Israel in exile, they surely have no better expectations for Jerusalem than Chicagoans had for the South Works slag field. Yet the prophet assures them that “fields shall be bought in this land of which you are saying, ‘It is a desolation, without humans or animals’” (32:43). In this week’s passage, Jeremiah continues the agricultural metaphor in outlining how this will happen: God “will cause a righteous Branch to spring up for David, and he shall execute justice and righteousness in the land.” In effect, he is telling the Israelites that the “fields” of their hopes for the restoration of their people and nation—not to mention the literal fields of Judah—are not as desolate as they seem. Where they see only a toxic wasteland, God is preparing the soil, making the way for something new to grow.

As we enter into the season of Advent, we are surrounded by literal and metaphorical wastelands. Environmental destruction, damaged relationships, and (at least here in the Rust Belt) the decaying remains of industrial production are all around us. But God has a way of being present in the places that seem most hostile to survival, and now we turn our attention to the incarnation of Jesus: God’s ultimate act of presence in our hostile world. During this time of watching and waiting, we can try to become aware of all the ways that new life is springing up from barren ground.