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On the television show *Fixer Upper*, Chip and Joanna show clients three homes that need various amounts of repairs. As they walk through the three homes, they begin to dream what could happen in those spaces, searching for the charm in the midst of outdated wallpaper or holes in the walls. Once the clients select one home, Joanna designs the new look and Chip serves as the main contractor to implement the changes. During each hour-long episode, a transformation begins to occur in the house, though sometimes they run into unexpected discoveries that sidetrack the project before completion.

King Josiah might have liked having Chip and Joanna in his court 2700 years ago when he realized the temple of God was a fixer upper and needed major repairs. Josiah became king at the age of eight after the assignation of his father. In the 18th year of his reign, he ordered the High Priest Hilkiyah to take tax money and renovate the temple. During the renovations, Hilkiyah found a scroll that had somehow become lost in the mess, but this was no ordinary set of words—this scroll was the Torah,

God’s holy teachings, once again found after years of neglect.

King Josiah quickly sent messengers to consult with Huldah, a prophetess who confirmed the authenticity of the scroll and its words. She sent back a message that the scroll contained words of challenge and words of hope, and that the people needed to follow God’s teachings contained in the scroll.

Immediately King Josiah called all the people together for a reading from the scroll. After everyone listened of God’s teachings read from the scroll, Josiah asked the people to promise to follow all that they had heard, and they agreed. From that moment, you might say a revival took place, for reforms began to occur as they reclaimed their worship practices and recovered religious festivals they had forgotten to celebrate.

It would be like today if we hadn’t read the Bible for generations and had forgotten the celebration of Christmas. While cleaning the church we come across a copy of the Luke’s Gospel from the Bible and read about the birth of Jesus and decide we

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once again need to celebrate his birth. Through the preparations we experience a sense of renewal as we excitedly decorate the church and prepare for this wondrous day.

Congregations go through cycles of despair and hope, struggle and joy, and members at times encounter times of renewal. In the book *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations*, the authors make this observation about congregations:

Your congregation is what it is today not because of what a bad pastor did to it, or because the neighborhood has changed or because our culture is [falling apart]. Although those occurrences and many others have had an impact, your congregation is what it is today because of how it responded, or failed to respond, to the realities it faced. What your congregation will be in the future is up to you and the other members and how you work together to create something new from the realities you face. What you do or don't do now will make the difference. Your actions will either reinforce the patterns that have become established in your congregation or start to counter and shift them. The leadership provided by your pastor can help or hinder, but it cannot make your congregation succeed or keep it from ultimately achieving the goals you set for yourselves.”¹

I imagine many of you can remember times when our congregation has struggled, when hope seemed lost, when the culture around us no longer supported our practice of attending weekly worship. You may also recall times of great vigor and vitality, when our congregation was filled with hope and the pews were overflowing.

You may also remember times of renewal, when in the midst of despair, something prompted hope once again, and although one cannot return to the past, a church *can* find hope in whatever new circumstances arise.

That's what King Josiah experienced—in the midst of forgetting their sacred writings and sacred days, he was reminded of their past and became open to a new future. Josiah could not create the renewal himself, for he consulted with the High Priest Hilkiah and the prophetess Huldah and other consultants, and then he gathered the other members of the congregation. Together they promised to follow God's ways and be open to where God's Spirit might lead them.

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Whether thousands of years ago during the time of King Josiah or in the past several decades of our own church, in the midst of those dry times, God can bring about renewal and hope, which is something that can happen in our personal lives as well. Maybe you can recall a time in your life when you entered a dry time, a time when nothing made sense, when it seemed as though all hope had been lost. When everyone around you seems happy and fulfilled, you feel distant and lost. You wonder how to get back to feeling content, but the feeling seems so elusive, as though it's hidden away in the bottom of a closet. You may feel like a fixer upper, like a worn-out house that needs repair. Underneath the faded exterior paint, you know you're a valuable person on the inside, but the outside seems worn and tired. Those who experience this sense of despair find this time of year especially difficult, when everyone around them seems joyful and happy and really into the holiday spirit.

Some may find it difficult to relate to the upcoming Advent season as we focus four weeks on joy beginning next week: Hopeful Joy, Loving Joy,

Complete Joy, and Peaceful Joy, with Christmas Eve celebrating Incarnate Joy. Why four weeks of joy, you may wonder? Something joyful happened 300 years ago, but that's a story for next week, so stayed tuned to find out what happened then and how it connects to our lives today.

There may be some among us who feel that joy is elusive, that it's hard to find. For some, gathering for worship may feel like a blue Sunday, a day when one would like to celebrate but just can't find the joy. For others, joy may seem elusive every day, not just on Sundays, until a small sign of hope emerges, as was the case with a prisoner of war.

In her book, *Life and Death in Shanghai*, Nien Cheng writes of her experiences in a prison during the Chinese cultural revolution. In chapter after chapter, she describes the brutality of her captors as they attempted to break her will and force from her a confession of conspiracy against the government of the People's Republic of China. But she would not break, and she constantly affirmed her innocence. Mrs. Cheng was a widow, and she was separated from her only daughter... Apart from her faith...she had nothing as a resource upon which to rely.

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At a key moment in her incarceration, Mrs. Cheng writes, she saw a tiny spider...crawling up the side of the cell window. When it had climbed to the top, it began the intricate process of spinning a web: “It swung out and descended on a thin, silken thread spun from one end of its body. With a leap and a swing, it secured the end of the thread to another bar.” This process, Mrs. Cheng recalls, happened over and over again until there was a frame upon which to build a web: “There was no hesitation, no mistake and no haste. It knew its job and was carrying it out with confidence.” When the spider’s task was complete, it “went to its center and settled there.”

Nien Cheng suggests what this meant to her:

“I had just watched an architectural feat by an extremely skilled artist, and my mind was full of questions. Who had taught the spider how to make a web?...

And then she concludes:

“For the moment, I knew I had just witnessed something that was extraordinarily beautiful and uplifting. Whether God had made the spider or not, I thanked him for what I had just seen. A miracle of life had been shown to me. It helped me to see that God was in control...I felt a renewal of hope and confidence.”²

One doesn’t need to face imprisonment to experience despair. No matter what chaos enters your life, when you may feel like a fixer upper, in need of repair, remember that God welcomes you as you are, struggles and sins and all, for God sees you as a beautiful work of art and offers you a vision of hope. When joy seems elusive—wait, hope, and trust that God’s Spirit still moves in your life, offering new possibilities you may never have imagined.

¹ Daniel P. Smith and Mary K. Sellon, *Pathway to Renewal: Practical Steps for Congregations* (Alban Institute, 2008), as quoted on homileticonline.com.

² Gordon MacDonald, *Christ Followers in the Real World* (Nashville: Oliver Nelson, 1989), 102-3.