

Advent 2C
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Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. Amen.

Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.

Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;

for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven.

For God will give you evermore the name,

"Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."

**Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look toward the east,**

**and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.**

**For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;**

**but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.**

**For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made
low
and the valleys filled up, to make level ground,
so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.**

The woods and every fragrant tree
have shaded Israel at God's command.

For God will lead Israel with joy,
in the light of his glory,
with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

**'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.**

**Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'**"

**Arise, Jerusalem, and stand on high
And look about to the East
and behold your children gathered together
from the rising to the setting of the sun
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but the Lord will bring them back to you,
Riding high in honor, as Children of the Kingdom.**

In the first parish I served as a priest (St. Gregory of Nyssa in San Francisco) we prayed these words—a slightly different translation of which appeared in today’s first reading— immediately following communion almost every week.

This prophecy, this promise, this vision is inscribed,
not only in my memory and in my imagination
But on my lips, and on my heart, in my very cells.
It is a vision that encapsulates my deepest Christian Hope

At St. Gregory’s we gathered in the round for the Eucharist, encircling the altar, so as we prayed this prayer together each week (as the priest chanted the words and the congregation intoned a drone to amplify and lift the prayer) , we could in that moment already begin to actually see and hear and feel the presence of God’s children – gathering around God’s Table from all the four directions. In this way our weekly Eucharist was indeed a foretaste, an anticipation, a foreshadowing of the eventual, great and glorious Homecoming of All God’s Children.

**Arise, Jerusalem, and stand on high
And look about to the East
and behold your children gathered together
from the rising to the setting of the sun
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but the Lord will bring them back to you,
Riding high in honor, as Children of the Kingdom.**

For the Prophet Baruch, who first wrote these words, and for his original audience, the “children” in this text are the exiled People of Israel, and their “enemies” the powerful armies that dragged them out from Jerusalem into exile in Babylon.

To the exiled Israelites living in Babylon, this divine promise of homecoming probably seemed as impossible as it was glorious.

As Christians today we hear in Baruch’s prophecy a promise that extends *beyond* its original historical context. We hear not only God’s promise to the people of Israel in exile in Babylon.

We hear in this text a promise that extends to all humanity—all creation even—to all who dwell in exile from God’s original and ultimate intention for Creation.

This promise of a universal homecoming of all people and all creation to God probably seems, to many of us, as impossible as it is glorious.

**For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies...**

For many of us, Babylon is the least of our worries—but there are countless other, equally powerful, enemies that threaten to drag us, along with God’s other beloved children into exile.

What enemies threaten to drag you away from your true home in God?

What about the others around you—and around the world— who find themselves in exile?

What enemies continue to bind us, shackle us, and drag us ever deeper into exile, far from our home in the heart of God?

There are powerful enemies that dwell within and among us, not only as individuals, but within our communities and institutions—including the church—and society at large. Some of these enemies might have names like:

Racism. Sexism. Ageism. Ableism. Classicism. Colonialism.

Homophobia. Transphobia. Xenophobia.

Patriarchy. Poverty. Abuse. Exploitation.

The list goes on and on.

But often the very most powerful and destructive are the enemies that dwell within us. Some of these enemies might have names like:

Fear. Resentment. Rejection. Insecurity. Addiction. Isolation.

Shame. Pride. Envy. Greed. Anxiety. Despair.

In Advent the Church anticipates the coming of the One who will break the chains of every enemy that binds us, who will herald the end of our exile, and will hasten a Universal Homecoming to our One true home in the Heart of God.

There is a deep hope and an abiding promise in these prophetic Advent Visions...and there is also an urgent and challenging call. The prophets remind us that there is hard work for each one of us to do, even while we wait and watch and hope for that promised day of Homecoming:

The Prophet Baruch instructs us that:

God has *ordered* that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.

In a similar way, The Prophet Isaiah (who is quoted by Luke in today's Gospel) instructs us to:

**'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'**

The Gospel assures us that the love of God is powerful enough to break the chains that bind us. And once we are free we can—and we must—share in God's work of unshackling others. But that is only the first step.

Because even after our chains have been broken and our shackles cast off, there is still the matter of making the long journey home.

For the past several weeks, In our Godly Play class and our Montessori Chapel, we've been telling a series of stories about Advent. The stories emphasize the long, long Advent journey we are all making together to Bethlehem, (along with Mary and Joseph and the Shepherds and Magi and all of the others). The story does tell us that the journey is long. What the story DOESN'T tell us is just how rugged the road might be, or how exceedingly steep the grade might be at times! After all, even if our destination is not too far off, as the crow flies, the journey to get there might seem long, impossible even, depending on the terrain we have to traverse along the way.

But before you sit back and give up, and before you lace up your hiking boots and start walking, listen up:

The prophets don't simply exhort God's people to train to improve their own rock climbing skills. God has ***not (in fact)*** ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be *summited*.

No. In fact, According to Baruch....

God *has* ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills *be made low* and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so [the exiles] may walk safely in the glory of God...

God commands us—and all who hear the prophet's call – to SHARE in the work of clearing the path... until ALL God's Children can walk safely in the glory of God...until ALL PEOPLE can safely complete the long journey home....until ALL FLESH **shall see the salvation of God**

Our work—in Advent and in every Season— is not **just** to make progress on our personal journey back home to God. Our work is to begin *and*

continue to do our part to remove the various obstacles that prevent OTHERS from making their journey back home to God.

What obstacles? (You might ask.) Do you recall the enemies we named a few minutes ago? Do you remember a few of their names? Often the enemies that drag us into exile in the first place, solidify to become the very same obstacles that stand in the way of our journey home.

We might say that, in Baptism, God has called each one of us to participate in a Cosmic Building Renewal Project.. One might say that, in Baptism, we've all been given a mandate to help Remodel the Universe, and improving accessibility is our #1 concern.

How do you level a mountain? How do you fill in a valley? One shovel full of dirt at a time. It takes patience. It takes perseverance. It takes faith. It takes energy. It takes effort. It takes cooperation and teamwork. It takes long hours of labor and regular, deep, sabbath rest.

In your Advent devotions this week I invite you to consider this question: What is one thing might you do— in this day, this week, this season, this year—to make the path back home to God just a little bit easier for one of your fellow travelers, a little bit smoother for someone who will follow behind you on the long journey home?

But Wait! Listen! Pay Attention! The prophets tell us to pay closer attention to ***The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:***

**'Prepare the way of *the Lord*,
make *his* paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled,
and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight,
and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.**

Did you hear it? If we get too wrapped up in our own work and worries, we might miss the most important part.

But if you listen closely, you'll hear the prophets hint at the impossible, unexpected, glorious, Mystery for which the Season of Advent is our annual preparation...

**'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.**

See, We mortals are not the only ones who will travel this road. This path we're preparing is no one-way street!

We are preparing the way, not only for ourselves, and not only for those who will follow behind. Somehow we are also preparing the way for the One who goes before.

For, even as we're bent over, diligently working, shovels in hand, each doing our own small part to bring down the mountains and raise up the valleys, and make smooth the road that leads back home to God, God comes...

(I'm not exactly sure what preposition to use. I don't know whether God is coming down, or coming out, or coming back, or coming up the road)

but I do know that God is coming;
and God has come,
and God will come.

God is coming to meet us;
to go before and behind and alongside and with us...
to show us the way...
and whenever we grow weary and our human strength fails us
(as it undoubtedly will, time and again)
the God from whom all Life Comes,
the God to whom all Life Returns,
this same God comes to meet us and raises us up;
God raises us up and God carries us home.
Each and every one.

**Arise, Jerusalem, and stand on high
And look about to the East
and behold your children gathered together
from the rising to the setting of the sun
at the word of the Holy One,
rejoicing that God has remembered them.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but the Lord will bring them back to you,
Riding high in honor, as Children of the Kingdom.
Blessed be the name of the Lord
now and forevermore. Amen.**