

The Church of the Good Shepherd
The Rev. Christine Love Mendoza
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Advent II – Baruch 5:1-9 and Luke 3:1-6

From the prophet we hear this call: “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.” In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

I don't know about you, but I've spent the past week reading obituaries, remembrances, and biographical articles about our 41st president, George H.W. Bush. My appreciation for his leadership during such turbulent global times has been refreshed with the benefit of contextual distance – I think I'd lost touch with just how uncertain our world order was at that time. I've also enjoyed the sharing of Bush's personal side: his grand sense of humor; his polite and genuine interest in others, and his love of family and friends. By virtue of upbringing, he seemed bred to lead and achieve, focusing on the big picture and larger goal and striving to uphold what he saw as universal values. And yet, by virtue of his generous nature, he was also interested in the individuals involved and before him.

Historian Jeffrey Engel, with the Center for Presidential History at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, was interviewed on NPR earlier this week. As he spends much of his time and research with letters and documents from President Bush, he was asked if there was anything in all those works that stands out – that really illustrates his worldview. Engel said that from the slew of transcripts of conversations that Bush had with every foreign leader during his entire administration, it was ironically Bush not writing and not talking that most impressed him. He commented that President Bush really knew how to *listen*. Apparently, if he had a few moments free on his calendar, it was his habit to call up a foreign leader, whether in Africa, Asia, or wherever, and just ask them, what's going on in your world? What do you think is important? And then he would just *listen*. Engel says that “the fact that we have so many transcripts of President Bush not talking, but actually listening to other people around the world, as the most powerful person in the world, is really quite telling.”

Listening. I believe that is the essence of the season of Advent. Throughout these four weeks of preparation for the incarnation of Christ in the world and within our hearts, and as we wait for his coming again in great glory, we are called to listen. We sit in the dark silence of winter and train our ears for the still small voice of our God who is calling us home. Throughout eternity, throughout all human history, the God who is the creator of all things, seen and unseen, sings his eternal love song to us, calling us back into intimate relationship. No matter how far away from God we may feel, that distance is never too far for God. But it is up to us to step aside, be quiet for a moment, and listen with the ears of our hearts for this call to return home.

In our scripture lessons today, we hear from two prophets. Speaking to different people in very different contexts, their shared message nonetheless rings out with beautiful clarity. In our Old Testament lesson, Baruch speaks to a demoralized Israel, in the wake of the destruction of the temple and exiled to Babylon. The voice of the prophet calls out to God's people: “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.” (5:1)

It can be hard to understand their sorrow, unless we think of people in our own time who share their misery – refugees from war-torn lands and victims kidnapped and trafficked into modern-day slavery. Stripped of the institutional structures that shaped their lives, their temple destroyed, their homeland laid waste, the people of Israel languish under the thumb of the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar.

Baruch echoes Isaiah's lament for the current state of God's chosen people but also reinforces his hope, proclaiming: "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... God will bring them back... 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." (5:5-7) THAT is the great promise: that no matter how distant God may seem, no matter how far or how challenging the journey home may appear, God is always calling us home. And if we only turn and begin the journey back, God will ease our passage: fill in the valleys and level the mountains, make straight the paths and smooth the rough terrain. God will do this for this has always been God's invitation to his beloved creatures: Come back to me, come home, my love will shine the way.

Often, however, God's call is hard to hear in the midst of the busyness and noise of everyday life, and especially during these frantic holiday times. One must pause and be quiet and turn one's attention inward to hear the quiet voice of God. In Advent, I am reminded of Elijah who, fearing for his life after the killing of so many prophets at the hands of Jezebel, wife of King Ahab, laments to God of his fate. And God responds by instructing him to stand upon the mountain and await His presence. The Lord sent a mighty wind which broke the rocks in pieces; then He sent an earthquake and a fire, but His voice was not found in any of them. After all that, the Lord spoke to Elijah in a still small voice, or "gentle whisper." (1 Kings 19:11-13 KJV)

In the Advent season we focus our attention on our waiting, expectant with hope, for what God will do next, and listening for God's still small voice. And while we wait and listen, we also prepare and cleanse our hearts to receive God's incarnation of love. Today's Gospel lesson speaks of John the Baptizer, who was chosen to announce the coming of Jesus: the Messiah, the Christ, the Savior King. "Prepare the way of the Lord," John calls out and his words are equally meant for us as for the people he directly spoke to. John announces to us all that something special is about to happen and that God will be coming near in a new and wondrous way.

In order to receive Emmanuel, God with us, John says we need to repent. Repentance is the common translation of the Greek word metanoia which means not just sorrow for past sins but a total and radical change in outlook in our relationship with God and other people. It calls for a radical and genuine renewal and conversion of heart. It is this metanoia or conversion that will bring about the forgiveness of our sins. Through our radical turning to God, our responding to God's call to come home, we are freed from the burden of our sins and are reconciled with God, each other, and within ourselves. It is a healing, a making whole. And this forgiveness and reconciliation will look like the prophet's startling image: between the land of captivity and Jerusalem, the desert will be leveled, its mountains smoothed down and its valleys filled up, so that we returning exiles may travel with ease. The path back to intimacy with God will be made smooth and clear.

I leave you with my very favorite vignette that I read about former President Bush. Bush's longtime confidant and colleague James Baker also lives in Houston, not far from his

friend of over 40 years. When Baker served President Bush as his Secretary of State, he always called him “Mr. President” but once Bush was out of office Baker called him “Jefe,” Spanish for “chief.” A week ago Friday morning, Baker decided to visit him because he knew the former president was ailing. When Baker arrived, Bush was sitting up in bed. Baker says that Bush looked at him and asked, “Bake, where are we going?” Baker said, “Jefe, we’re going to heaven.” And Bush replied, “That’s where I want to go.”

I suspect George H.W. Bush had been an Advent man – he was one who listened. He listened to his constituents. He listened to his advisors and friends. He listened to world leaders. And I suspect he also listened for God’s quiet voice.

That is our Advent invitation this year, and every year. Be still; wait in hope; and listen. Train the ears of your hearts to listen for that still small voice. And if you sit quietly in the dark winter silence, you might just hear God’s eternal love song being sung just for you, and you, and you: come back to me, come home, my love will shine the way.

Amen.