

“Peace, A Promise”

Sermon Preached by The Rev. William H. Critzman
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Scripture References: Baruch 5:1-9 & Luke 3:1-6

Earlier this week, Pastor Howard sent me an email questioning today’s scripture. “Will,” he wrote, “why did they choose Baruch for the readings when Isaiah says all the same things?” Good question, faithful colleague, good question indeed. The book of Baruch is a book from what is often referred to as the second canon, a Deuterocanonical book, that in our Protestant tradition can be found in the Apocrypha, that great set of books often sandwiched in between the Old and New Testaments. Unfortunately, our pew Bibles here don’t contain the Apocrypha, an omission we’ll correct in time. As many of you know, the Apocrypha contains many works of scripture that for one reason or another got left on the cutting room floor when the monks were assembling the official order of the Bible as we now have it.

Not all the monks agreed, mind you; there were some books included in some bibles that weren’t included in all bibles, which isn’t exactly helpful when thinking about the one true, holy, and apostolic Catholic church to which we profess; nor is it helpful to the Orthodox, or right thinking, church which has just as many disputes about these books as our western Catholic-Protestant line. The book of Baruch is typically found in the Old Testament of the Roman Catholic, Greek, and Slavonic Bibles. It is included in the Apocrypha of our own. No matter where it’s placed, the Revised Common Lectionary, the guide that many reformed churches including our own protestant denominations, offer it as today’s first lesson. Today, on the second Sunday of the new church year, we are in year C of the three-year lectionary cycle. While years A and B take the text from Isaiah, clearly some young monk was able to get some diversity of voices here in the third year. The lectionary has a mysterious wisdom. I find it often gives us what we need when at first appearing to hold back what we want.

I mean, after all, this is Advent. This is the time for mighty Isaiah and those most gracious words of prophecy. We know the prophet Isaiah’s language: it is poetry and scripture, promise that rings in the ears of the church, echoes—like the 23rd Psalm—that were memorized, by those of us who did such things, in the words of the equally mighty King James Version of the text. In three sections—first, second, and third—Isaiah, some might say, gives us all the prophecy and language we need for this season of waiting for the Messiah. George Frederick Handel certainly thought so. The gospel writer Luke, and also Matthew, agree—quoting Isaiah extensively. Many of you might too. As Howard was quick to note—a note I’d already imagined many of you would share—Baruch says a lot of the same things as Isaiah, so why did we read it, and why today? Redundant. Repetitive. Not nearly as good as Isaiah. Was it a rough draft for Isaiah? Or a bad paraphrase? Let us agree with the monks of brevity—cut it! This is, of course, a trap we want to avoid, unless you’d prefer only one of the gospels, or would like to make the tough decision about whether to have only the first *or* the second chapter of the book of Genesis. Scripture, as we have it, and even as we don’t yet fully have it, is often repetitive: like a classical symphony, themes, motets, phrases repeat themselves. They change keys in the hands of different writers. They’re lifted by different instruments, or sung in a different register. This is part of what keeps scripture alive for us today, alive in the voice of our still speaking, never quite finished, God.

The book of Baruch comes from the first or second century of the era before the time of Christ. Scholars date it to the Maccabean period, which here on this day toward the end of

Hanukah feels like reason enough for us to hear it. Hanukah is a Maccabean celebration of the miracle of light that lasted for eight days when there was only enough sacred oil for one day in the time when the Maccabees defeated their colonizers. The Maccabean period is a time—unfortunately not a long lived one—when the ancient Israelites gained independence from Rome, and it was a time of flourishing in Jerusalem. Out of this time, scholars contend, Baruch writes. He writes five relatively short chapters in three sections reflecting on the themes of communal repentance, the gift of the Torah, and the comfort of God. The book certainly relies on Isaiah, but not just Isaiah. If you look closely, you’ll see that it’s a pastiche of Isaiah, Daniel, and Job—an interesting trio, not one I’d necessarily go to when editing a new story. Remember, though, that Isaiah, Daniel, and Job were written several centuries before this time when Baruch wrote, and the prophecies they penned, the promises of peace they shared, were but a glimmer, a hope, in God’s people’s eye. Here, though, in the light of eight miraculous days of oil, in a time of flourishing and self-determination, it seems that prophecy may indeed come to pass, and that God is fulfilling God’s promise.

And so Baruch 5:7, “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” fulfills Isaiah 40:4, “Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low; the uneven ground shall become level,” and even this, sounds an awful lot like Luke 3:5, “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.” Repetition. Theme. Shared promise, this is some of what holds the individual books of our scripture together as one Word.

Have you ever seen the meme or maybe it’s an info graphic or a gif or post—I’m actually not sure what the right social media term is—but it’s a picture that can be found on the internet that explains the difference between equality and equity? It’s a simply illustrated picture of three baseball fans trying to enjoy a game from the wrong side of a fence. Our three fans are of three different heights: the tall one has no problem seeing over the fence, and enjoys the game; the middle height one can catch a glimpse or two, but only if they’re jumping up and down, or standing on tip-toes; the shortest, no chance. It’s a sad picture. Three people wanting to see over the wall, but only one—simply by luck of height or age—is able. The second frame of the cartoon graphic introduces three boxes and distributes them equally among the fans. Each fan now stands on one of these boxes so that the tallest fan is even taller; the middle fan is now comfortably tall enough to see the game standing still; but the youngest fan is still staring at the wrong side of the fence. This, the caption says, is equality. It’s our distributing resources equally to all people regardless of need or want, but it seems fair, a common and perhaps simple solution. Equality is about sameness.

In the third frame, those same three boxes are distributed to our fans differently. To the shortest one, he gets two boxes, stacked on top of each other, and now he can clearly see over the fence. The middle one, she gets one box, and lo’ she can see over the fence easily. The tallest one, nothing for him, he didn’t need one to begin with, so why give him one at all? Our three fans are now all standing at exactly the same height, all able to see over the fence easily, all enjoying the game. This, the caption tells us, is equity. Equity being the distribution of resources as needed by diverse people with differing needs and differing attributes. Equity is about fairness.

In our ongoing discussions about equity, diversity, and inclusion, recently a fourth frame has been added to the developing graphic. This fourth frame is the simplest of all and is captioned “Inclusion.” Any guesses at what happens in this graphic? The fence is removed.

The barrier to enjoyment, the border between the have-baseballs and the have-not-baseballs is erased. Take away what holds people back, what hems us in, and there, problem solved not by more boxes, but by less barriers. Equality, equity, inclusion is a progression.

It makes me wonder a bit about what those mountains made low might have felt about the valleys getting all their best rocks and dirt. What happened to their splendor, their majesty, the height to which they had aspired? Was all that beauty—purple mountains, rocky turrets, glistening white summits and ever green shaded ridges—to be leveled for the service of some undeserving valley? And what about the valley? Didn't it delight in the wonders of its shade, or that a river flowed through it and an oasis blossomed. Wasn't it in the valley where people dwelled, protected by day, stargazing at night? Here where the animals were set to pasture. Here where the rich crops grew. Here, a lowly valley, upon which shepherds watched while keeping their flocks by night. Mountains made low and valleys raised up. Why? So that we may walk safely. Why? So that we may not get lost in the wilderness, or along a crooked path. Why? Equity. So that all—all God's people—may follow with joy in the light of God's glory, with the mercy and righteousness that comes from God, from God alone.

The fifth chapter of the book of Baruch is part of the book's closing section; it is referred to as the Poem of Consolation. This is the consolation to a people who have come through by a God who has done the leading. The Poem of Consolation in Baruch is the *post-hoc* account of what Isaiah foretells. Baruch notes that the times, they have a changed, and he writes a triumphant account of equity and inclusion that promises peace. Peace, a promise that the high will be brought down and the low raised up. Peace, a promise for level playing fields. Peace, a promise that whatever walls divide us may one day be removed.

In the words of Baruch we hear today, we are told to take off the garments of our sorrow and affliction. In other words, strip down or take off the hardened gear of battle that has led to our weeping. Take off that which has caused us pain—maybe it's a uniform for a job you hated and that you can finally leave; maybe it's the shroud the widow's worn for the last year; maybe it's the long sleeves that hide a shameful scar or the headpiece that keeps the conversation about chemo at bay. Maybe it's the clothes of a gender that doesn't feel true, or the conformity of a school uniform promising prosperity but oh so far from equity, or the suits of our working years cleared out to make room for the leisure of retirement. Whatever your garment of sorrow might be, put it aside, Baruch says. And if Baruch isn't enough yet, don't just take his word for it, you can check Isaiah 61:10 where you'll find this song: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness." Take off, put down, whatever holds us back. Put on instead, the beauty of the glory of God, a beauty that is given uniquely and individually to each of us. The robes of righteousness crafted for all of you are custom, they're bespoke, God-tailored just for you.

One of the things I love here about Baruch is that in this Poem of Consolation, it is we who are clothed in splendor, we who are called to dress in righteousness, we who are told to put aside our mourning clothes and to claim our peace. For though Isaiah's triumphant King of Kings and Lord of Lords is indeed something to sing about, here the royal dia-a-a-a-dem is not for another's crown, but for our own. The crown of the glory of the Everlasting God will be placed on each of our heads as God will show your splendor everywhere, and proclaim your beauty far and wide. Why? Because God made you beautiful, just as you. How? The mountain of God will come low. For us and for our salvation, God will come from heavenly heights to dwell with us in our lowly places. Emmanuel, prince of peace. Angels from their realms of

glory, from heaven above to earth God comes, coming upon a midnight clear, this is a season of mountains being made low. And for our part, every valley shall be lifted up and we shall see the salvation of our God. So royally clothed, so crowned with diadems, so radiantly clad in Godly glory, may we approach God not just in our weakness, but in our strength. Like magi and wise kings from ages past, we walk in our splendor which is the beauty of the glory of God. And as we come, on these paths made less treacherous, across the plains made by mountains bowing and valleys standing tall, we will come to find a lowly child sent from heaven above. Laid in a lowly barn stall as a sign of peace for us and for all people, a child will be born. And we, in all our splendor, without any sorrow or affliction, as a sign of the salvation of God, will come and gather on bended knee. The mountains will make themselves low. The valleys will fill themselves up. And on level ground, without any barriers, we shall know peace. Peace, a promise to us all.