

The Church of the Good Shepherd
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Advent 2; Baruch 5:1-9 & Luke 3:1-6

Almighty God, your prophet calls to us: "In the wilderness prepare the way of the Lord, make straight in the desert a highway for our God." Help us, we pray, to make the wild deserts of our hearts ready for your Holy Spirit to make his home among us. We ask this through Jesus Christ, the light who is coming into the world. Amen.

In church, we sure do *a lot* of talking! We give long sermons; we pray aloud extensive liturgies; we regularly recite the historic creeds of the church. Oh! So many words.... Even our sacraments – like baptism – while punctuated with physical earthly elements and dramatic action, they are just chock-a-block filled with talk, talk, talk. And then there is coffee hour. Oh my. The din of our enthusiastic chatter can be deafening!

With all this talking, we Episcopalians sometimes forget the virtue of listening. Listening to each other. Listening for the subtle stirrings and whisperings of God's Spirit to us. Listening to the ancient prophets' cries that still ring throughout creation: "Repent and return to the Lord..." "Arise, O Jerusalem... look toward the east..." "Prepare the way of the Lord... and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

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 pause amid the busyness, 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: Baruch and Isaiah. While they speak to the chosen people of God in different times and contexts, their shared message nonetheless rings out with beautiful clarity. In our Old Testament lesson, Baruch speaks to a demoralized Israel. 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. It is to them that the prophet recalls God's promise of comfort and salvation: "Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God."

Baruch both echoes Isaiah's lament for the current state of God's chosen people and 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 long or challenging the journey back 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. This is God's invitation to his beloved creatures, ringing eternally throughout creation: *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 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 then a fire, but His voice was not to be 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 are invited to focus our attention on our waiting, pregnant with hope, for what God will do next, and listen 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 introduces the ministry of John the Baptizer, who was chosen to announce the coming of Jesus, the Messiah, the Savior King. “Prepare the way of the Lord,” John calls out, and his words are equally meant for us now as for the people to whom he directly spoke.

John proclaims to 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 in this context means not only sorrow for past sins but also a total and radical change in our relationship with God and other people. To repent is to turn in a new direction – to turn away from self and toward God – for our wholeness and sense of identity. 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 and a clearing away of all that keeps us from the intimate presence of God.

Through our radical turning to God, we are freed from the burden of our sins and are reconciled with God, each other, and within ourselves. In other words, we are redeemed and restored to our baptismal state of grace. 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 Zion, 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.

That is our Advent invitation this year, and every year. Be still; wait in hope; and listen. Train the ears of your hearts to seek that still small voice. Keep your eyes fixed on the eastern horizon, expectantly awaiting as Zechariah prophesied, “the dawn from on high [to] break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness,” and “to guide our feet into the way of peace.” (Lk 1:77b-79) And as you sit quietly in the dark winter’s silence, you might just hear God’s eternal love song being sung just for you: *come back to me; come home; my love will shine the way.*

Amen.