

“Laying the Foundation for Peace”

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December 5, 2021

Advent 2C

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Baruch 5:1-9

Luke 1:68-79

Let me begin by telling you I chose the reading from Baruch today even though it is kind of an outlier in Protestant religious experience. Roman Catholic and Orthodox Christians would find Baruch in their bibles if they bothered to look for it, but that's not the case for most Protestant Christians. It comes from a set of books called the *Apocrypha*. Some Christian traditions consider these writings to be divinely inspired; other traditions see them as nothing different than mere human writings. Perhaps you can decide for yourself-- you can find these books nestled snugly between the Old Testament and the New Testament of the bible-- that is, if your bible even includes the apocrypha; many Protestant bibles, including our pew bibles, do not.

But these words of scripture just danced before me, drawing me in. They felt like an invitation to something extraordinary happening, something I'm not sure I know too much about, but something I want to take part in. Maybe you will want to take part in it, too.

But first, let's figure out what to wear. The scriptures begin by commanding that we take off the garment of sorrow and affliction, and put on forever the beauty of the glory of God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting.

Baruch is talking to a people, Israel, as they prepare to leave the captivity of Babylon and return to Jerusalem, and work for its restoration. They had been held in exile in Babylon for 70 years-- long enough that most of the people who could even remember what the glory of home looked and felt like had already died; long enough for multiple generations to be born, who only remember Israel through the eyes of their elders. These are the people to whom the prophet tells, “Cast off the garments of sorrow and affliction; put on forever the beauty of God.”

What does that even mean? Over the weekend I had a dinner party with a group of long-time friends. One of them, who has had a varied media career and is currently working as a producer for a sports channel, shared that she went on a job interview with Condé Nast, the media empire that publishes numerous magazines. As part of her interview, she met face-to-face with Anna Wintour-- the iconic editor of *Vogue*. My friend, who is completely down to earth and very practical with money, has a sporty-casual vibe: for most of our gatherings she shows up in jeans. She shocked our group of friends when she told us that to get ready for this meeting, she bought herself a pair of Louis Vuitton boots-- I don't think I've ever even touched boots that cost that much! One of my other friends asked, “Did you return the boots after the interview?!” Our friend did not, but she says they are now going to be part of her wardrobe for

any future interview she gives. Still, I'm pretty certain it wasn't her boots that caught Anna Wintour's attention; it was my friend's charming sense of humor that instantly disarms and allows people to open up, not to mention her ingenuity. She's been told since that interview that she's the top candidate in their search.

I am pretty sure that a pair of Louis Vuitton boots aren't necessary if we are preparing for the title of Righteous Peace, or Godly Glory, as the prophet in Baruch proclaims. But I can't even begin to imagine what garments of glory the prophet in Baruch is asking us to wear; what *is* a robe of righteousness? What *is* a diadem-- or crown-- of glory? I get it that these aren't literal clothes that need to be purchased. But what I don't get is, how we can be free of our garments of sorrow and affliction, and find these new, glorious robes?

The bible is big on making dreamy promises; however, the practicalities of how to get there are often vague. Maybe my friend who might get hired by Vogue could do a little editing for the bible too, so that we can get some more clarity.

Here are some examples of how the bible makes promises, but then doesn't tell us how to get there:

Long, long ago, a child was promised to Abraham and Sarah, in their old age. Sarah laughed. I don't blame her; no one gave her an explanation of how this could be. Still, despite her disbelief, she bore a son, Isaac, at an impossibly old age.

It happened again with Elizabeth and Zechariah. They, too, had become old. Too old perhaps for the dreams they once cherished. And yet, an angel had promised them a child. When Zechariah questioned this promise, the angel did nothing to explain; instead, Zechariah was struck mute.

And yet again, it happened, with the girl Mary, as we will soon hear again the beloved story told. An angel proclaims to her that she, an unmarried teenager, will bear a child. She asks a question, too, "How can this be?" Mary's the only one who got a little bit of an explanation-- something about the Holy Spirit overshadowing her, and that the child to be born will be holy, the Son of God. Mary responds with her consent: "Here am I... let it be according to your word." Today, when reproductive rights are being denied to women and families, it's important to note that God gives Mary the opportunity to offer her consent.

We recently refinished our attic to make it a work and play space. Among the forgotten boxes that had to be cleared out, my daughter unearthed a pair of black, patent leather, open-toed, high-heeled shoes. They belonged to my mother, who died when my daughter was 1. I don't even remember saving those shoes, but since they are a size 7 and I'm a size 10, I can only figure I saved them in case my daughter would grow to want to wear them. At the rate her feet are growing, they will likely fit her next year, and next year only. She's already practicing: at first, she wobbled, asking, "How can you possibly wear shoes like this?" "We don't." Chris and I both replied. Still, her steps have become steady with practice. Often she parades through our

living room, dancing in those shoes with the confidence of Beyoncé, singing songs inspired by her imagination and radiating with joy. It's her pre-game ritual whenever she is about to go to a gathering she's excited about. The shoes never make it out of the house, but putting them on seems to prepare our child for good things to come.

It's funny that a forgotten pair of shoes can tie generations that never really got to know each other. And though my mom didn't often show the kind of joyful confidence that seems to come naturally to her granddaughter, I like to think that my daughter is able to live into some unspoken longing my mother had, that was never fully realized.

I guess that's a lot to place on a child. But compared to John the Baptist, and Jesus for that matter, my kid has it pretty easy.

Imagine this conversation:

*Are you going to name him Zechariah, after his dad?*

*No, Elizabeth said, his name is John.*

The neighbors and relatives exchanged glances and clucked their tongues.

*"But none of your relatives are named John."*

Then, they turned to Zechariah, who was sitting silently in the corner. Once he was a man of many words. But ever since he questioned the angel's prophecy that he and his wife Elizabeth would have a child in their old age, he was struck mute; each day, as he watched his wife's body swell with pregnancy, he said nothing but grew and grew in his wisdom and understanding of God's glory.

*What is his name?* The neighbors and relatives again asked Zechariah, looking to the male authority since they were unsatisfied with Elizabeth's response. The old man motioned for a tablet. They watched as his hand scratched the words onto its face:

*HIS NAME IS JOHN.*

At that point, the Holy Spirit fell upon Zechariah, and he began prophesying. I like to imagine that he cradled the 8-day old child John in his arms as he made these promises:

You child, will be called prophet of the most high God.

You will go before the Lord to prepare his ways.

You will give knowledge of salvation to all his people, by the forgiveness of sins,

By tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us,

To give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,

To guide our feet into the way of peace.

It's amazing to think that Zechariah could have held this 8-day old child, smelling of curdled milk, with eyes that can just tell the difference between darkness and light, eyes that can only focus on things that are 8-10 inches away, nothing farther away than the face of the person who is holding them. Zechariah could hold this child, and see all these promises that had been hoped for across the generations, but not yet seen.

This second Sunday of Advent, the lighting of our Advent wreath focused on the candle for peace. Peace comes when our salvation is upon us. What is it you need saving from today? What does our world need to be saved from, in these times?

Peace comes when, as Baruch says, the high mountains and everlasting hills are made low; when the valleys are lifted up to make level ground.

Peace is knowing that God has remembered you.

Peace is being free from your enemies, free from those garments of sorrow and affliction. Sometimes, even when we *are* free, we keep putting on those garments, because they are familiar and close-by and well-worn. Sometimes, it never occurs to us that we can wear something else.

And sometimes, we do not make it on our own into those pathways of peace. It may be another generation after us that discovers it. But consider this: Is it possible that ours *is* the generation that God has prepared to bring in that world of peace, the peace our scriptures promise a little too vaguely, the peace our ancestors hoped for but never fully found? Is it time we stop looking toward the next generation to fix the damage we have caused? After all, Zechariah may have looked to John with all that hope and promise, and while John the Baptist did indeed prepare the way for the coming of Jesus, he was also assassinated by beheading. So, perhaps peace is something we have to lay the foundations for now, as an inheritance for the generations to come.

Even if wearing the robe of righteousness and the diadem of glory feels like a drag performance to you, especially if your clothes of habit are sorrow and affliction, consider it a performance worth giving-- not only for ourselves, but for a world that is hurting and longing, too. Remember, these clothes are our inheritance, saved for us by people who dreamed visions with lots of hope and lots of love. As Zechariah sang, "Thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered their holy covenant," We may be wobbly in these shoes at first. But in time, we may one day discover that the shoe fits.