

A Vision of Peace

I have been troubled this week by multiple ironies. As I have worked to prepare our worship together, focusing on the traditional theme of the Second Week of Advent, that of Peace, we have heard an address from our nation's President committing our country to an intensified war in Afghanistan. This proclamation of increased reliance on military force to solve a complex situation was brought to us by the same man who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize just weeks ago. For any who were hoping that the career of this president might follow the arc of Advent, going perhaps from "The Audacity of Hope" to the realization of peace, that optimistic anticipation has now been dashed. As I considered a prophecy of peace for Israel this week, I could not help but reflect on the similarities between the Land of Promise and the bitterly contested country of Afghanistan. Both are countries situated at the crossroads of important trade routes, now no less than in ancient times, and both have seen wave after wave of conquerors, each seeking their own economic or security goals without consideration of the people trying to live and maintain their culture without being washed away by the rolling tide of greater nations. I have been aware all week of the competing visions of peace offered by a man named Barack and a man named Baruch, two versions of the same name meaning "blessed." I cannot let our time together pass without mention of President Barack Obama's vision of peace achieved by violence. The words of the prophet Jeremiah, mentor to the Baruch who is credited with our reading this morning, warn me against turning a blind eye to reality when preaching on peace. Twice in his prophecies, Jeremiah inveighed against the religious leaders of his time: "For from the least to the greatest of them, everyone is greedy for unjust gain; and from prophet to priest, everyone deals falsely. They have treated the wound of my people carelessly, saying, "Peace, peace," when there is no peace." But my primary focus this morning will be on the vision of peace from the earlier Baruch – the peace that comes from God, a peace embodied in the work of the Incarnate Christ, the peace that we, as the Body of Christ, are now called to champion in this war-torn world.

While the vision of peace offered by President Obama this week has been nearly inescapable, we are likely to find the vision of peace offered by Baruch both obscure and strangely familiar. Because of the relegation of his book to the status of Apocrypha by Martin Luther and generations of good Protestants, we're not likely to be immediately conversant with Baruch. If his name rings a bell at all, it will be because of his status as secretary and friend to the prophet Jeremiah and the several mentions of him in the book that bears that prophet's name. The Book of Baruch, according to the first verses of chapter one, is a word to the exiles in Babylon not long after the destruction of Jerusalem. There is a confession of sins by the exiles and a prayer for deliverance, as well as a remembrance of what God had done on behalf of Israel over the ages and a poem in praise of Holy Wisdom. Our passage this morning comes from the longest section of the book, in which Baruch encourages the exiles to wait on their coming redemption from God. If certain sections ring in our ears as familiar, it is because Baruch drew heavily on the work of Isaiah. Some of these same verses are also quoted by Luke in his description of John the Baptizer. If nothing else, it is proof that the inspired words of Scripture have relevance for situation after situation, even up to our own time.

Baruch's vision of peace is not simply that of the cessation of war but that of the true Shalom of God, a time of well-being and wholeness. The people of Israel are to be made whole by the restoration of what they have lost – the return of the exiles – and by the completion of their relationship with God. They are to become, as promised in Exodus as well as Isaiah, a holy

A Vision of Peace

nation, a kingdom of priests. Using the image of Jerusalem to address all the people, Baruch calls on them to shed the sackcloth of mourning and the rags of defeat in favor of the priestly garments of Aaron. Like Aaron, the Children of Israel personified by Jerusalem will wear a crown, a diadem, which the Book of Exodus describes as being engraved with the words, “Holy to the Lord.” The restored Israel is to be a witness to all humanity of how to live in true shalom, living out the life of true relationship to God which God desires for all persons. Some scholars believe that the Book of Baruch was actually written much later than ascribed, perhaps during the period I mentioned last week when Israel was ruled by Syria, prior to the Maccabean Revolt. If this is true, then the one writing as Baruch was proclaiming the word of God to a people living in relative peace and Jerusalem was a cosmopolitan hub of commerce. The author would have been reminding the people of Jerusalem of the great opportunity they had to impact the representatives of many peoples and nations with their example of shalom-living. It is a good reminder to us, as well, living in a cosmopolitan area relatively untroubled by the faraway war in which our country is engaged. We can also point to our New Testament calling in I Peter to be a royal priesthood and a holy nation, an example, in other words, of life as the Beloved Community or Kingdom of God.

Baruch proclaims to his readers the promise of God to make the city of Jerusalem, which symbolizes their nation, the city of peace. They will be known forever more, he writes, as “Righteous Peace, Godly Glory.” This promise is connected with the command to “put on the robe of righteousness that comes from God.” Isaiah had told God’s people before, “The effect of righteousness will be peace, and the result of righteousness, quietness and trust forever.” To make this connection between living in truth and justice and the resulting peace even more apparent, the translators of the Jerusalem Bible render Baruch 5:4 as “The name God gives you forever will be, ‘Peace through integrity, and honor through devotedness.’” This vision of the origins and foundation of peace as living in the will of God stands in marked contrast to the bellicose start to peace so often promoted today. In her lectionary blog this week, Debra Dean Murphy, a Methodist minister in Raleigh, North Carolina, remarks, “The aim of war is not peace but victory.” She quotes the great Kentucky poet and author Wendell Berry who says of any victory won by violence that it “necessarily justifies the violence that won it and leads to further violence... What leads to peace,” says Berry, “is not violence but peaceableness.” As we know, the people of Israel did not achieve the status of the Peaceable Kingdom, either after their return from exile or during their brief independence under the Maccabees or at any time since. As long as peoples and nations seek their security through trusting in chariots or their modern equivalent, rather than in seeking the will of God, then peace will be elusive, just as foretold by Isaiah.

It is a theme picked up in the next verses of Baruch’s vision – a glimpse of the re-gathering of the exiles and the lost tribes in the Holy City. They are restored not by force of arms but by the mercy of God. The image of the rejoicing multitudes coming from the east calls to mind the splendor of the rising sun after a dark night of pain and sorrow. Again, Baruch seems to be revisiting the prophecy of Isaiah: “The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness— on them light has shined.” It is a promise integrally tied to the power of God, for who but God can command the rising of the sun or its setting? The Gospel according to Matthew also recalls Isaiah’s words about the people who walked in darkness but he uses it not in relation to the return of the exiles but to describe the return to Galilee of Jesus of Nazareth, the Prince of Peace and the Hope of all people. Baruch’s words

A Vision of Peace

may also recall for us another of Isaiah's visions so often heard at this time of year: "Arise, shine; for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you." The people of Israel still waited for the glory of the Lord to rise upon them but we have experienced the presence in our lives of the light that shines in the darkness and of his glory, the glory of the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. We have a resource in the eternal presence of Emmanuel, God With Us, to empower us to live the life of peace, of true Shalom, as we seek to assist in the building of God's Beloved Community.

The language of every mountain being made low and every valley being filled may be so familiar to us from Isaiah and Luke, not to mention Charles Jennens' libretto for Handel's *Messiah*, that we do not stop to consider its meaning. In those days long before humans were able to fly in spacecraft, airplanes or even balloons, mountains were the closest human beings could get to the heavens, where God was supposed to dwell. Mountain tops were therefore important sites of worship and not just in the Temple atop Mount Zion. God's order "that every mountain and the everlasting hills be made low," therefore, had at least a couple of connotations. First, it was a sign that all the places where humankind might be worshipping other gods would be pulled down. This idea is echoed in Baruch's next verse where all woods and trees, also the common focus of pagan worship, are claimed for Israel by God. With mountains made low and trees serving Yahweh, no idol of human devising could have a place in competition with the True Creator, an important point to consider in our world where allegiance is too often given to gods of prosperity or national security or personal status above the call of the God of Peace and Justice and Mercy. But every mountain being made low also eliminates the distance between the One God and God's people. No longer does God dwell on high; God now dwells among humankind. Our God is with us and within us. This is reason indeed for rejoicing.

Valleys, on the other hand, were used to symbolize the times that people were farthest from God. Remember the Psalmist's image of "the Valley of the Shadow of Death," or Biblical references to the Valley of Tears or the Valley of Bitterness. There was also the literal Valley of Hinnom outside Jerusalem where Canaanite inhabitants had sacrificed children to their god Moloch. That valley's evil reputation echoed well into the time that faithful Israelites had made it a garbage dump, complete with burning piles of refuse, and it became known as Gehenna, later associated with the Christian understanding of Hell. For these valleys to be filled in, then, lifts those who have suffered in them up to the level of their more obviously blessed brothers and sisters, out of their misery and into fellowship with God, who has come down even as they are brought up. The shalom of God goes well beyond the end of war and into the healing of the nations and the soothing of every sorrow.

The image of mountains being made low and valleys being filled shared by Isaiah, Baruch and Luke may also call to mind the more immediately familiar picture of road construction. Some of those orange cones and barrels that we are so accustomed to seeing on I-5 have even migrated onto our own property! In Isaiah and Luke, the verses about the mountains and valleys are prefaced with the idea that the leveling is taking place to prepare a way for the Lord, to make a highway in the desert for God. In the context of our Advent passage from Baruch this morning, it is a reminder to us that the way to peace is indeed a journey along a road. Dianne Bergant, Professor of Biblical Studies at Catholic Theological Union in Chicago writes, "These readings do not focus on Jesus' coming to us, but his coming with us. He leads us to salvation. Because

A Vision of Peace

there are obstacles in our path, road construction is necessary. This is not the kind of road repair that we can avoid by taking another route. We will have to move carefully through reconstruction of the road as we travel over it. What obstacles must be removed? As individuals, we might have to overcome deep-seated resentment, persistent fault-finding, unwillingness to forgive, dishonesty in our dealings with others, a bullying attitude. As a society we might have to dismantle unfair housing policies, employment disparity, economic injustice, racial and ethnic biases.” I would add to Bergant’s list on this Peace Sunday that we must remove from our path the rubble of violence from our national policies as well as the bullying attitudes we may carry as individuals. Bergant reminds us that the goal of our journey is no less than “the new Jerusalem, the new city of peace and justice, the reign of God on earth. The journey toward that city may be tedious, and the obstacles we encounter on the way may seem overwhelming, but God leads us just as God led the Israelites.”

Baruch wrote, “God will lead Israel with joy in the light of his glory.” In our gathering hymn this morning, we sang that Jesus, the light of the glory of God, will “guide the feet of pilgrims along the paths of peace.” This world’s leaders would have us believe that peace comes from war but I am not convinced because I believe that the Scripture and the example of Jesus teach us something far different. To bring true peace to all the world, for God loves all the world, Jesus was willing to suffer and to die. We come together this morning in the presence of the memorial elements of that suffering and death, the bread and cup of Communion. Few of us will be called to die for peace, except that we are all called to die to selfishness and sin. Few of us will be called to suffer for peace, unless of course we have become so accustomed to luxury that we think that doing with just a little less so that others may have enough is suffering. We are called, however, to take our place as God’s nation of priests, to put on the diadem that identifies us as God’s people and to show the world our deep joy in the love of God. We are the people whom God longs to call ‘Peace through integrity, and honor through devotedness.’ Let us begin anew our journey toward Peace on this Second Sunday of Advent, as we join in, along with believers from around the world and across the ages, in our ceremony of Communion, the table of Our Lord, the Prince of Peace. May God continue to guide us in the way and may our struggling steps towards peace be blessed. Amen.