

Sermon Preached by The Rev. John S. Nieman
St. Margaret's Episcopal Church
December 5, 2021 Advent 2/Year C
Texts – Baruch 5: 1-9; Philippians 1: 1-11; Luke 3: 1-6

In the first year of the Presidency of Joe, when Janet was governor of Maine, when Nancy was Speaker of the House of Representatives and Chuck was Senate Majority Leader, and Jared was Representative of the second district, and Eric was Mayor, during the Episcopacy of Thomas and the Priesthood of John, the Word of God came to Fred by the side of the Passagassawakeag. He went into all the region around the harbor, driving a rusted out '57 Chevy pickup, coon dog by his side in the front seat, telling people, "Wake up! Get yourselves ready! The Lord is coming!"

Curiosity seekers came out from all the surrounding towns to see what the clamor was all about. The Lutherans sang rousing hymns. The Episcopalians poured glasses of Cabernet. The Baptists invited him to preach. Fred wore flannel and Carhart, chewed tobacco and ate wild moose meat. Occasionally he plucked a guitar and nipped a little Wild Turkey.

So, what do you think of Fred? Would you go out to hear him? Or would you chalk him up as just one more in a long line of crazy people – or if not crazy, perhaps just irrelevant in the context of our busy lives? Would you pay him any heed? Could he be the voice of God in our place and time?

Each year during the Season of Advent we hear from Fred's distant ancestor, John the Baptist. We can count on it. Next week we will hear from him again, but his tone of voice will be a stark contrast from what we just encountered. Next week we will move from his comforting words of restoration that we just heard, to fire and brimstone: "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come!" It sort of makes you wonder: what was John's first-century audience doing that elicited such strong words from him?

Today, though, our readings are filled not with dire warnings, but rather with the comforting good news of a coming restoration. It's not a lashing out against our personal vices or societal brokenness, but rather a warm, loving embrace from the God who is calling us home to begin again.

The short apocryphal book that bears the name, Baruch, is a patchwork of literary elements, some narrative, and some poetic, as in today's passage. Baruch was written perhaps as late as the first century BCE, but it is set during the time of the Babylonian Exile, four or five centuries earlier. Both were traumatic times marked by devastating social, religious, and economic disintegration. The poem we heard today looks forward to a joyful day of restoration: "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." This is good news! God remembers God's people. No matter what the extent of our disintegration, no matter how far off we have strayed, no matter how hopeless the situation seems, no matter how dysfunctional our society, God remembers us. God yearns to put us back together.

And, of course, there is John the Baptist, who stands in the great tradition of prophets uttering the good news of God's remembering us in times of hopelessness. Luke puts some of the most comforting words in all of Scripture from Isaiah into John's mouth: "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low...and all flesh shall see the salvation of God."

First century Judea and Galilee during the time of Luke's writing bore many similarities to the sixth century BCE, the time when that portion of Isaiah was likely written. In both eras, the Temple had been destroyed, the people were dominated by a foreign power, and all that God had promised seemed lost and gone forever. John's recovery of Isaiah's words must have sounded like music to the ears of the many who had lost hope, the many who had thought God had forgotten them.

But God had not forgotten them. God remembered them.

The vision of God's restoration is the substance of our hope. Indeed, it is the reason for the Church's existence. It is our mission. Even our catechism, that basic outline of the Christian faith in the back of our Prayer Book, states it plain as day: "The mission of the Church is to restore all people to unity with God and each other in Christ."

But the restoration of which the prophets and John the Baptist speak and the Church exists to accomplish is not something that happens by our waiting passively for God to work some kind of wondrous magic. Restoration always goes hand in hand with reformation – allowing ourselves to be re-formed again and again. And that is the hard part. It's not simply about waiting for God to act. It's about reforming ourselves in such a way that we are able to receive the gift of God's restoration.

This is the message of Advent, is it not? Waiting – yes. But an active waiting. A waiting that involves preparation: reforming ourselves and the world in which we live; reconstituting ourselves around the identity we have in Christ.

John was not just a prophet. He was also a baptizer. And his message was to call the people of Israel back to who they were: the people of God, chosen to be a light among others, called to live in single-minded devotion to the liberating God who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, called to pursue justice passionately and relentlessly for the most vulnerable, called to love God and neighbor. John's baptism was aimed not at those outside the covenant community of Israel, but at the very people of the covenant. It was a baptism of individual and corporate repentance, of turning around, of reforming themselves around the remembrance of their identity as God's people.

And so, too, is our baptism. It is a baptism of repentance, of turning around, of reforming ourselves around our identity, which is Jesus, the one who comes to save.

The Church needs to hear that message with renewed attentiveness. Our Presiding Bishop, Michael Curry, has made it his focus during his tenure to call us back to our true identity as a missionary people, people sent out to proclaim the Good News that God has remembered us. He is reminding us that now is the time step out in hope into the fresh air of the full Gospel, which is truly stunning and earth-shaking.

The Christmas proclamation, which we will hear again in a few weeks, at its core is the message of ultimate restoration. Heaven and earth, eternity and time, God and human being, Word and flesh are united in Christ. It is the message of great joy that John came to proclaim. But John reminds us that Advent must accompany Christmas, that re-formation must accompany restoration.

It's December 5, 2021 in Belfast, Maine. Joe is President, Janet is Governor, Fred is out there somewhere, and we are here and now. Today we gather again around the table of Christ, where we receive the sacrament of our own identity: the table of pardon and solace, the table of strength and renewal, the table of restoration and of reformation.