

Second Sunday of Advent—Year C

Sunday, December 9th, 2018

Three weeks ago, I talked to you about the destruction of the Temples in Jerusalem. I say Temples, plural, because there were two Temples; the first was destroyed in 786 BC, and the second in 70 AD. In the Gospel reading for the 33rd Sunday in Ordinary Time, we find Jesus, around 30 AD, prophesying about the destruction of the second Temple, a prophecy that came to pass about 40 years later. Jesus reminded his disciples not to put their ultimate confidence in passing things but rather on permanent eternal things, like God and his word. The age of the Temple was passing, and was being replaced by Jesus himself, the new and perfect Temple, eternal priest and perfect sacrifice.

The destruction of both Temples was followed by two exiles. The Jews were first exiled to Babylon after destruction of the first Temple, and were, after some 70 years, allowed to return to Judea and Jerusalem by order of King Cyrus the Persian. After the destruction of the second Temple in 70 AD, Jews moved to various places in Asia Minor, Greece, Egypt and the Middle East. The Jews established long-lasting communities in these places and remained without a homeland and country until the modern nation of Israel was established by U.N. decree in 1948.

While exile was a time of grief and sadness, the exodus experience was full of joy and new hope. The word *Exodus* means ‘a going out’ and, in the history of the Israelites and the Jews, meant a return to one’s homeland after a time of exile.

We are most familiar with the exodus experience recorded in the Books of *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers* and *Deuteronomy*. The roots of this exodus are found in the *Book of Genesis*, where the patriarchs of the tribes of Israel, Joseph and his brothers, emigrate to Egypt to avoid famine. There, in time, they were made into slaves and remained there in that state for a few hundred years. Moses then led the descendants of Joseph and his brothers out of Egypt, back to the land God had promised to their ancestors, Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. After 40 years they entered the land God had promised them, where they would be his covenanted people. This is the Exodus we are most familiar with.

There was, however, another promised exodus in the Old Testament. After settling in the promised land, the Israelites sinned against God, and God permitted, first the northern tribes of Israel to be conquered and exiled by the Assyrians, and secondly, Judea in the south to be conquered and exiled to Babylon by the Chaldeans in 586 BC. The Northern Israelite tribes settled in various parts of the known world and are lost to history.

Many Old Testament prophets, like Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel, predicted that God would initiate another Exodus, where the Israelites would return to Israel from all the nations of the world. This became known by biblical scholars as the *New Exodus*. Among the prophets who prophesied about the *New Exodus* was the minor prophet Baruch, a portion of whose Book is our First Reading today. Baruch was the secretary of the better-known Prophet Jeremiah and he wrote down Jeremiah's prophecies. In the third section of the *Book of Baruch*, the prophet describes Jerusalem as a grieving mother, pining for her exiled children. He reminds her to now remove her mourning veil because her children are returning to her.

Baruch tells her to *look toward the east, and see your children gathered from West to East*. Baruch is referring to the exiling of the Israelite people from the Northern Tribes by the Assyrians in the 7th century BC, and of the people of Judah in the South by the Chaldeans in 586 BC. Baruch looks forward to the day when all the tribes of Israel will end their exile and proceed back to the promised land, like the Israelites who were led by Moses hundreds of years previously. There will be great joy in this return. They were led out to exile in shame and defeat, but now they will return "Head aloft in glory and on royal thrones."

The words "royal thrones" is in reference to a Davidic King who is returning from exile with his people. It must be remembered, however, that no Davidic King returned with the Jews to Judea following their Babylonian exile. The kingly line of David was never resumed throughout the rest of the Old Testament period. The Prophet Baruch's vision goes further than a political restoration of the kingly line of David. Baruch is looking forward to a future glorious consummation, where God will travel with his people and end their exile from him forever. God will bring them back, with him and to him, to their home, their covenant, and their worship.

This sense of God travelling with his people inspired Baruch to quote the following words:

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

This passage is a virtual quote from the Prophet Isaiah, Chapter 40, and derives from ancient high-way building practices. The scripture scholar John Bergsma stated the following:

When kings or emperors would take trips to survey their realms, they would at times expend the effort to build (or re-build) a smooth road specifically for a royal entourage. In this reading, the imagery is that the scattered Israelites are now royalty, and God is having a road built for their return home.

The return of the Jews from their exile in Babylon in the late 500s BC was a partial fulfillment of God's Promises of a new exodus. The Davidic royal line was not restored, not all the tribes of Israel returned, and Jerusalem and its citizens still languished in poverty. We need to proceed to the Gospel to hear how God will fulfil the promises of a new exodus.

The Gospel writer Luke identifies John the Baptist as the previously unidentified voice calling from the wilderness to prepare the way of the Lord, as found in Isaiah 4:3-5. St. Luke is very careful to situate John the Baptist in history, along with Caesar (Tiberius), the regional governor, and even the religious leaders of the day. This reminds the readers of his Gospel that John and Jesus were not myths or fantasies, but real men who lived in a real time and place. He is offering a true, historically verifiable testimony, and one can place one's trust and faith in the words of his Gospel.

Like Baruch, John the Baptist repeats the Prophet Isaiah's call to begin a work-building project in anticipation of the Lord's arrival. The road building project, however, requires a spiritual interpretation. The crooked ways, the mountains and valleys are referring to the geography of the human heart—sin. Filling in the valleys and levelling the hills means we need to attend to our sinful hearts, for there we find the barriers to the quick arrival of the King. One must remove these barriers so the Lord, and our salvation through him, can come to us quickly, rather

than being impeded by our sins, described metaphorically as mountains and valleys.

John the Baptist is reminding our generation, as he reminded his own, to repent. In the rush to prepare the numerous things that are a part of our Christmas celebrations, we tend to forget that Advent, like Lent, is a penitential season. This means that we should preparing ourselves spiritually at least as much time and energy as we are preparing the material things that are a part of the celebration of Christmas. For this reason, I will be available at various times for the individual celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation.