

Sermon for 2 Advent
December 8, 2024
The Rev. Canon Raymond Raney
Trinity on the Hill Episcopal Church
Los Alamos, New Mexico

Baruch 5:1-9
The Song of Zechariah
Philippians 1:3-11
Luke 3:1-6

“... The word of God came to John son of Zechariah in the wilderness:
‘Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.
Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low,
and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth;
and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.’”

How do you do that? How do you prepare the way of the Lord?

What a task John’s father lays before him:
“You, my child, shall be called the prophet of the Most High, *
for you will go before the Lord to prepare his way...”

John’s words in the Gospel and Zechariah’s song in the Cantic
resonate with the words of preparation in Baruch:

“Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. ...
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.”

About 600 years separate the voice of Baruch and the Gospel of Luke.
For both voice cry out with a message of deliverance.

Baruch was the scribe of the prophet Jeremiah.
He is writing just before the Babylonian exile in the 5th Century BC.
Israel was conquered by Babylon and most of the people of importance
were hauled off because, according to the prophet, the leaders of the nation
had not followed the commandments of God.

Prophets are a squirrelly lot.
They are commanded by God to tell people things they don’t want to hear,
and they’re required to tell rulers things that will get them killed.
And they’re probably not particularly easy to live with.

Look at John the Baptizer. He’s wearing camel hair.
That’s not like a camel hair overcoat.

Camel hide is anything but smooth and fashionable.
It's your original hair shirt that is worn for discomfort,
and John even wears a leather belt to make sure the camel hair
is held tight to his body to ensure his discomfort.
And his diet does nothing for his attitude: locusts and honey.

And here he is, screaming at people to "Repent!"
This is the man who prepares the way of the messiah.

There had been a series of messianic figures in Israel before John and Jesus,
and there would be those that followed them.
It was a time when people were aching for change.
They had been under the foot of Rome for more than 50 years,
and they didn't really care for their puppet king, Herod. They wanted change.

Israel under the Maccabees had risen up about 200 years before
to throw off the Syrian overseers.
Now as resentment against Rome grew,
the time was ripe for another messiah, a warrior in the line of David,
to rise up and throw off the Roman oppressors.

Baruch had given them cause to think the time had come:

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.
For they went out from you on foot,
led away by their enemies;
but God will bring them back to you,
carried in glory, as on a royal throne.

So John's message that one "more powerful than I" is coming rang out
and drew those who yearned for an end to tyranny.

And so all these people tromp out of Jerusalem and make their way to the Jordan
to hear what John has to say,
and John prepares them for new life through baptism.

How do you prepare the way for New Life?

New life: looking back over my years, I have to tell you,
I'm surprised to be standing here.
I never expected to live much beyond my twenty-first birthday,
which I observed during the aftermath of Tet 1968 in South Vietnam.
Between then and now, so many have prepared me to get from there to here.
I'd like to share one of the many stories I've collected from that war.

Charles Plumb was a US Navy jet pilot in Vietnam.

After 75 combat missions, his plane was shot down by a surface-to-air missile. Plumb successfully ejected. He was captured and spent 6 years in a North Vietnam prison. He survived the ordeal and lectured on lessons learned from that experience.

Plumb tells the story that one day, when he and his wife were sitting in a restaurant, a man approached him and said,

“You’re Plumb!

You flew jet fighters in Vietnam from the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk.

You were shot down!”

“How in the world did you know that?”

“I packed your parachute.”

Plumb shook his hand and the man said, “I guess it worked!”

Plumb replied: “It sure did. If your chute hadn’t worked, I wouldn’t be here today.”

Plumb tells us that couldn’t sleep that night, thinking about that man.

“I kept wondering what he might have looked like in a Navy uniform: a white hat, a bib in the back, and bell-bottom trousers.

I wondered how many times I might have seen him and not even said ‘Good morning, how are you?’ or anything because, you see, I was a fighter pilot and he was just a sailor.”

That sailor had spent on a long wooden table in the bowels of the ship, carefully weaving the shrouds and folding the silks of each chute, holding in his hands each time the fate of someone he didn’t know.

When he lectured, Plumb would tell the story and then ask his audience:

“Who’s packing your parachute?”

Plumb survived his years of imprisonment

because of the spiritual, emotional, mental and physical training he’d had for so many years before he went to war.

All those people who’d packed “parachutes” of love and support that lifted him up and kept him from falling into despair in the darkest of his days.

So it is for me, to remember the people who have given me strength and encouragement without even realizing the gift they’ve given.

In this Advent season of preparation it’s easy to stay busy and not take the time to encourage others with a hello, a please, or a thank you.

As you go through this week, this month, this year, be attentive.

That way, perhaps, we can begin to recognize people who pack our parachutes, and, even better, start packing the parachutes of others in our lives.