

Beyond Bethlehem...

"Preparing The Way... Through!"

Baruch 5: 1-9...from the Apocrypha;
Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:2c-6

August 11, 2019

Rerun of December 9, 2018

We only have Christmas...because we have Easter.

It is not until Jesus grew up to walk the talk of peace through justice...a lasting peace unlike empire can offer...

only after he grew to be such a threat to the order of empire...and so was killed to stop this holy message...

which we know could not be killed off and came to be experienced by us as Easter...

it is only after the Easter experience did early believers think to wonder how Jesus really came into the world.

So celebrating Christmas is more than celebrating his birth but also celebrating beyond the season, beyond that reason.

If you do not keep walking through Bethlehem and even beyond...if you only walk your life to Bethlehem,

you make small the meaning of this season.

Shallow the depth of your faith and its impact on real life.

If you only walk to Bethlehem and not beyond,
you get that let down.

Nothing new will be born in you.

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And this second week of Advent,

we hear the verses in Baruch, who writes in a time of exile,  
call us out of the dark boding that flowed beneath  
last week's wisdom teachings into a different perspective  
on what God's coming will mean:

reunion and return from exile  
and a time of glory, joy, mercy, and  
peace...

a new perspective... a peaceful hope to begin the future *now* knowing God is with us and sees clearly what truly is!

*You know*, we all know something about being exiled.

What exiles do you long to return from?  
From where are you banished?

What parts of yourself have you forced into exile in order to cope with/accommodate the way things are...

parts of yourself that so long to return to the living of each day?

Calling us back from exile is the confident proclamation of God's steadfast love, to embrace God's presence...Emmanuel, as we walk the path to more life.

Every fragrant tree shading our every step along the way....as God commands. God cares about your exile and your return!

*But* as I look around this world and its cycles of famine, war, poverty, and injustice, I wonder what this passage has to offer beyond a superficial image of "it will all be better."

...at first hearing, it may seem Baruch offers a classic fairy tale happy-ily ever after ending that so often doesn't really seem to come true.

But you know if I go deeper, pay attention to that first verse,

I can begin to hear something very powerful and potent that doesn't delude or sugar coat.

Listen again..."Take off the garment of your affliction and sorrow....and put on the beauty of the glory of God, the robe of justice that comes from God."

Do both, not take off and stand naked...but yet vulnerable, not put on a superficial glory without having examined what's wearing you down.

And then, put on compassionate justice.

Do both and you will shine, your new name righteous peace...a peace that withstands all life's circumstances.

So...don't just take it, isolate yourself, give up.... look for justice and **put it on**.

Don't take the abuse, do something about it.

Don't just see the injustices of hunger and housing and under employment, do something about it.

We are made able to walk, the way is made clear. No matter the enemies that may lead us away, we can return.

This is a call to return from exile to the land of your birth...

a just land where you are honored for who you are....  
to experience Christmas...and beyond!

We as a people and you as a person  
must be willing to take off your identity of affliction in which you cloak yourself..

take off the riot gear you wear to make your way through hectic days and mobs,  
the uniforms so you blend in,

the flak jacket you wear to defend yourself against what seems an endless onslaught,

the mantle of self-righteousness where you justify your agendas...

the mantles of entitlement on your shoulders  
full of pride and self-justification to continue  
to do what you want to do the way you usually to do it.

God is imploring you:

Lay down the routine of your sorrow and affliction.

Don't keep wearing it as an armor so heavy that keeps you stuck or within a false sense  
of safety and security.

I'm hearing a personal invitation to transformation....

my own! Lay it down Karen. Take it off Karen.

Off your shoulders. Out of your thoughts. No more!

Exile is over. Do you hear me, Karen?

This is wonderful good news.

The same and yet different good news for each of us for we each have our own sorrows  
and afflictions....and return.

One size walking shoe does not necessarily fit all and neither does one way of walking  
God's path,  
one way to pray for God's courage.

Paul prays....over the church in Philippi which was his first church.

In a very conflicted time and church that threatens its own members, he does not  
retaliate in tone

or try to convince them of anything

of which they are not willing to be convinced.

Instead he stays true to himself and his mission.  
He prays and stays....dressed appropriately for the occasion!

His prayer is that their love may be filled to overflowing with knowledge and insight:  
wisdom.  
That we love more and more.

Love is wise. It's active. A verb.  
With the awareness that sometimes Christian love easily devolves into a contentment  
with who we already are,

An easy love as if there is nothing to prepare or refine,  
and nowhere to grow.

Paul calls us to a rigorous love,  
one that comes through discernment to be part of creating a new justice, lives into a  
new baptism.

Paul's love is not an abstract feeling,  
but a dedicated and consecrated way  
of being in relationship with self,  
neighbor, creation, and God.

There is no exile in the new world order Christmas hints at....rather a new covenant of  
community of peace through justice as love intervenes along the way!

How do we speak and hear this in community, here at Tippe?

Do we dare to expect a certain level of commitment  
to trying on new behaviors and disciplines that will grow us into mature insightful  
active lovers?

John the Baptizer lifts up these very issues in his call to the people.

What does it mean to be called to repentance over and over and over...not just a  
positioning of our perceived best interest but true repentance and re-birth?

In Speaking Christian, Borg says that forgiveness is God's constant, God's love a given.

And the word forgiveness literally means from its Greek root: to go beyond the mind we  
have...go beyond!

And forgiveness is not dependent upon repentance...

God's forgiveness is!

But the repentance is up to you, not God...the do-over is given, you have to do it!

You have to walk your life forward.  
Forgiveness points us to the path of new life.

We are a people being called through forgiveness to salvation...forgiveness/going  
beyond the mind you have  
is the salve of healing for what ails you...  
here as we live, not later as we die.

What might it mean to experience that healing?  
To see and so straighten out what is crooked in our hearts and minds that is holding us  
back?

To smooth what is rough in our souls?  
And lower some of our pride?  
And rise up with some of our actions/choices?

John and Paul call to us to live against the ways of the world.  
And Baruch said the way has been prepared for walking!

Then as now...it is easy to hear nothing in the daily news  
but crisis after crisis, to be overcome with despair  
at the path some have chosen to walk.  
Like those ancient folks, we're troubled.  
Perhaps find ourselves anguished with sorrow and affliction.

And when you are in a place of deep anguish, it's hard to walk at all and our  
discouragement often sends us into exile.

Hard to have hope...

In such times,  
*will you* find your real Christmas courage and dress your life to come back from your  
exile and affliction

responding to this amazing offer of inner and outer peace....

or *will you* put on an emotional Band-Aid  
(rather than a robe of justice) just to get through.

Are you really willing to settle for so little

when so much is offered?

Settling, putting on Band-Aids actually takes a lot more energy...to keep up old facades...

than it does to actually start the process of becoming....  
you again!

Repentance means turning your life around and walking the talk all the way through Bethlehem and beyond.  
...valleys filled and mountains laid low!

In these times of information overload and blaring life styles where much can afflict us and push us to exile,

can we hear the nuanced call of our  
Advent/Christmas Story?

Will we let it more than intrigue us,  
be more than a fairy tale with a happy ending?

Will we let the story agitate us to go deeper, to that longing,  
go into the darkness....  
and there find the light of that star guiding us?

Will all the story's comfort seduce you...  
into doing nothing more than buying Christmas presents  
and baking cookies?  
Walking only to Christmas?

*Or will* it's comfort nudge you want something quite different than all this seasonal bliss...

Ahhh...the paradox of discomfort in Christmas!  
A real Christmas now made possible for we are no longer baptized by John to survive the world we live in,  
but now baptized by Jesus to create a new world  
in which all can live in peace and justice.

Paradox.  
On the other side of our biggest mistakes,  
we often discover our greatest courage.

On the other side of Advent and Christmas,

we find Epiphany.

The Christmas message is itself a paradox. One that works!

How might you linger longer to hear the holy hush of the paradoxes of your life this year?

Not hurrying past them, denying them, or ignoring them.

How can this be a safer time on a safer path...  
mountains lowered and valleys raised.... a time for you  
to hear God saying: It could be different for you!

The surest path begins with a better question to be asking yourself?

Is your deepest aspiration wings for spirit?  
Is your fear an aspect of your yearning?  
Is your obedience your freedom?  
Your doubt, your witness of faith?

For the opposite of faith is not doubt, it is certainty.  
A paradox.

And this is a story full of faith embracing doubt!

Hear the uncertainty as invitation to an as of yet unknowable future but a knowable path...  
an invitation to live again, fully and new!

The right path to be walking our lives takes us to a  
compassionate justice which brings peace to life...yours!

And so.....

I want more than just Christmas this year! I want to go beyond....

I got get me some new walking shoes...  
for the road through Bethlehem and beyond!

O Lord, this life is made for walking and that's just what I'll do. One of these days my  
life is gonna' walk me right to you!