SECOND SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Nu’uanu Congregational Church

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December 5, 2021

*“A Place at the Table” Baruch 5:1-9*

*Philippians 1:9-11*

I have a friend on Kauai who sends me a child’s Advent calendar every year. She sends one of those beautifully colored calendars, cardboard, it has a little door to open starting on December 1st, There’s also a bit of Scripture and a prayer to read, and a tiny picture to look at.

She sends it to me via Amazon, and every year it arrives in my mailbox about half-way through November. I remember being puzzled the first time I received her gift. What was I supposed to do with a *child’s Advent calendar?*

She said she sent it because she thinks pastors (especially) need an Advent calendar—and especially one made for a child—we need it to remind ourselves of the time of the year. That is, she thinks that we pastors get so caught-up in what this time of year means *theologically* that we forget how everybody else is experiencing the season.

While I am not sure I completely agree with her, I must say that the Scripture we heard this morning does take us into the celebratory spirit of Advent. Both readings seem to usher us into the midst of a festival. Especially in Baruch, but to a certain extent in the passage from Philippians, too, we find ourselves among the throng who are being invited to dress-up, to *party!*

For those of you wondering about Baruch. Baruch is what is called a Deuterocanonical book. It is one of the books Protestant scholars have had doubts about, and have so left it out of the standard part of our Bibles.

Historically, Baruch is from the era of the Hebrew Bible and would have been very well known by the people in Jesus’ time and by New Testament writers.

Baruch, the writer, is often referred to as Jeremiah’s scribe, but this is unlikely. However, like the prophet Jeremiah, Baruch addressed his message to the Israelites who had been carried off into captivity in Babylon, and his words reflect on the experience of exile as being very much like the experience of homelessness, the experience of being a refugee. In other words: they are a people who are weighed down by sorrow and loss; people who have no peace.

Baruch tells these downtrodden people to drape themselves in rich, festive garments. They are to wrap-up in swaths of bright, jewel-colored robes—and apparently everyone gets to wear a sparkling tiara.

Given the circumstances of the people, this seems like a pretty callous and insensitive thing to say. As one writer has described it: “when you are homeless your clothes become your only shelter.” However, what Baruch is drawing the people into is not simply a new set of clothes. Baruch is inviting the people to clothe themselves in the very essence and spirit of who *God* is.

What is more, these elaborate dress-up garments we are wearing will come to us only *after* we have thrown off our old clothes—the old *“garment of…sorrow and affliction.”* These are the garments of mourning and grief; the garments of people whose heart and soul are in an upheaval of anguish and misery. They are the garments made by human conflict and activity.

To these suffering people, Baruch proclaims a change of clothes and fortune through the generosity and compassion of God. It is these attributes of *God’s*—which is the epitome of God’s love for us—that is to be our garment, our home, and our peace.

We are to dress ourselves in the dignity of God’s glory, and in the peace that comes from justice, the honor that comes from reverence for God. To be clothed in robes that God offers us is to identify ourselves as God’s people—when others look at us, at what we are doing and who we are portraying—they see the same compassion and righteousness, and a peace that has come about out of the prevalence of justice.

It is a peace that comes out of a willingness to stand-up, and non-violently demand equal treatment by others, and in regards to the laws of the land.

This is not “pie in the sky.” You and I have seen so many people who have done just that. In the lifetime of most of the people here in this Sanctuary, we have seen people clothe themselves in the dignity and worth of God’s righteousness and step forth to demand fair and equal treatment.

We have seen people marching in many parts of the world. We have seen people marching forward clothed in God’s dignity in this country, too. Indeed, we have seen people marching for the peace that comes from justice for many years now and many generations. What is hopeful and frustrating at the same time is that each generation has found something new to march for—some new injustice that has been overlooked, but not someone is calling us to see and hear their voices.

I recently listened to the poetry of young Pacific Islanders. I listened to the anguish many feel about the way our people and our culture are being lost, how the land itself is being lost. I listened as they recounted the ways in they experienced their own selves—their hearts and spirits—and the way we have been splintered by the loss of cultural dignity which is usually exacerbated by economic disparities.

We need to clothe ourselves in the dignity and worth that is inherent in the love that God has for each and every one of us. Indeed, our justice, proclaims Baruch, comes from what we get down on our knees and do with God together in the dirt and the mess of human life. It is only when we are planting justice together with those who are just throwing off their oppression, that we have the opportunity for real peace.

As one writer has said, “peace is something we plant together and build together. And not a crumb, we toss off the table to those who can’t sit with us.” Peace makes a place at the table. Peace gathers all people from the east and the west—we are all gathered to sit at the same table, to sit together—native born and immigrant. And each one receives a fair share of the abundance of all good things at God’s table.

Indeed, such a reference should also remind us of Christ and the Holy Family who were made homeless by Caesar’s decree that very first night of Christ’s birth, and who later became refugees in Egypt because of Herod’s corruption and violence.

Says Hebrew scholar, the Rev. Dr. John Berquist, “If we are caring for women, children, and planting justice and peace for them, we’re creating a community that will care for everyone and bring new life wherever we go. And so the East and the West is a reminder, I think, of the biblical call to justice for all people in every generation.”

That brings us to one of the most difficult things about our life of faith, especially during Advent. We come to this season with all sorts of hopes and expectations. Every Sunday, we proclaim the coming of a child who will bring hope, peace, joy, and love.

The hard part is that it often feels as though we expect these good and wonderful life-giving things to just sort of “happen.” On this Second Sunday of Advent, it often feels as though we expect peace to happen through some kind of supernatural fiat because “tis the season” for it.

Even worse, it often feels as though we should only proclaim and celebrate peace, and not mention the hard realities of life happening all around us. It is as though we think that if we do not mention them, they have not really happened.

That is *not* the kind of peace Christ was born to bring us.

Ours is a peace that will come, says Paul in his letter to the Philippians, when we have received Christ and the totality of his life. Not just his birth, but also his crucifixion and resurrection. All of these aspects of his life show his love for us, and it is this that will change us and help us to change the world.

When we can receive the love of God that is born to us as a vulnerable, poor infant, and who lives and dies so that we may know a divine love which cannot be destroyed, a love that insists on rising and joining us again in our human existence, then our *“love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10to help* [us] *to determine what is best”* [v.1:9-10]

To help us determine for whom and how to make room at the table. *This* is what real peace does. That is the way peace will come, and so we remember and celebrate this on the Second Sunday of Advent not as a *fait accompli,* but as a reminder of the decisions, the “determinations [about] what is best” that we have yet to make. Love is what is to be our model, our guide and our standard.

On this Second Sunday of Advent when we turn our thoughts and prayers toward what can make peace in our lives and our communities, we call upon and are guided by God’s love. This is what will inspire and teach us to make room at our tables. This is what will guide us as we determine how to feed the hungry, how to clothe and house the naked and homeless, which is to say: how to love courageously—like God who loves the whole world, and who waits to be born into our lives once more.

On this Second Sunday of Advent, may we receive the justice of God being born into the world again, and may this show us the way to a true and lasting Peace for all people.

Amen.