

DEEPEST LONGINGS
Sermon for Advent 2C: Baruch 5:1-9
LPC, 12/6/09

December is a time of broken promises ... or at least flimsy promises. These promises may be obviously flimsy, but they're everywhere in December, and they come across loud and clear. Buy this product and you'll be happy. Give this gift and the other person will love you. Own this and be fulfilled. Some of the promises are more subtle: Watch this sentimental program and you'll have the Spirit of Christmas.

We all know better than to fall for these obviously flimsy promises, but it's hard to remain totally immune.

Contrasting with these phony promises are the promises of Jesus. I've mentioned Jesus' promises the last couple of weeks. Unlike the promises put forward by our culture, Jesus' promises are reliable. They also point to something more wonderful than perhaps we can imagine: forgiveness, completeness, healing, redemption.

The sheer wonderfulness of Jesus' promises can actually be a problem. On the one hand there's Jesus' promise of redemption, which is hard to describe and definitely can't be packed in a box. On the other there's this brand new car that we can touch and admire and smell and drive. Instant gratification has its advantages!

How are we to think of the promises of Jesus in a way that doesn't pale in comparison with glossy new possessions? The prophet Baruch has an answer to this question.

Baruch was secretary to the prophet Jeremiah. We heard about Jeremiah last week. Jeremiah was speaking to people who were facing defeat, exile and despair. Baruch, like Jeremiah, is telling these defeated people of what it will be like when God restores their fortunes. Baruch is addressing the remnant of people who were left in Jerusalem and watched their families marched off to slavery in Babylon. That great sorrow, Baruch says, will be reversed:

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.

This strikes a chord with me because I live in Wheeling, West Virginia. I hear a lot in Wheeling from people whose children grew up and left home, not because they wanted to shake the dust of this little burgh from their feet, but because there are simply not enough economic opportunities in Wheeling to support another generation of adults. Many of us grieve that our children have to live far away. Some of us are fortunate enough to have our adult children living close by, but have no confidence that our

grandchildren will be able to stay in Wheeling. How we long to have our families restored! This longing is so fierce!

Now, imagine that conditions are changed, so that those children and grandchildren don't have to go to Pittsburgh, Columbus, Washington, DC. Imagine them returning to Wheeling in triumph and prosperity. Imagine the grief assuaged, the loss restored, the longing fulfilled.

Our longing for our children's proximity, even in adulthood, speaks to so many things: our needs for love, for belonging, for security, for comfort, for completeness. These are things that can probably only be fulfilled in God. The closest we can get in our imaginations to this complete a joy is perhaps to envision being surrounded by those who love us.

This is how Baruch describes what redemption is like. The redemption of God is like the fulfillment of the longing dwells in our innermost soul. God's redemption will be the fulfillment of our deepest longing, not the gratification of our latest desires.

Traditional Christian anthropology teaches that because human beings were made in the image of God, they bear the imprint of God in their hearts. All human beings are built to fit into God, like pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. St. Augustine speaks of a "God-shaped hole" inside each of us. This need for God never goes away, although human beings continually try to fill the God-shaped hole with other, lesser things. This effort often leads to sin (in the first place) and doesn't work (in the second.) Only God can fill the deepest longing in a human heart. But every human heart longs, because that is the way we are made.

If we really believed that the fulfillment of our deepest longing was waiting for us, wouldn't we do everything in our power to hasten that fulfillment? Wouldn't we want to smooth the way for the bringer of that fulfillment?

Advent, these four weeks before Christmas, is a time to uncover those deep longings that we've assuaged with pallid, temporary substitutes. Advent is a time to listen to the prophet Baruch and try to believe that those longings can really be fulfilled and indeed will be. Advent is a time to listen to John the Baptist and remove all obstacles to the fulfiller of those promises. Next week we'll hear more about how to do *that*.

In the meantime, know that something wonderful is coming. And it's not a partridge in a pear tree. Or a shiny new car.