



SUNDAY SERMON

Our God, She is Waiting

The prophet Baruch speaks of a woman. Her name is Jerusalem. She is a woman who has lost her children. She is a city whose inhabitants have either fled or been taken away. This woman, Jerusalem, has been in mourning.

The prophet Baruch gives voice to her lamentation, thus:

“Listen, you neighbors, God has brought great sorrow upon me; for I have seen the exile of my sons and daughters. With joy I nurtured them, but I sent them away with weeping and sorrow. Let no one rejoice over me, a widow and bereaved of many; I was left desolate because of the sins of my children, because they turned away from the law of God.” (4:9-12)

She addresses her distant children: “Go, my children, go; for I have been left desolate. I have taken off the robe of peace and put on sackcloth for my supplication.” (4:19-20)

But then: “Take courage, my children, cry to God, and God will deliver you from the power and the hand of the enemy. For I have put my hope in the Everlasting to save you, and joy has come to me from the Holy One, because of the mercy that will soon come to you from your everlasting savior.” (4:21-22)

Then the prophet introduces another voice, that speaks to the woman, thus: “Take courage, O Jerusalem.” (4:30)

“Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of righteousness. Put on your head the diadem of glory.” (5:1-2)

“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.

“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.” (5:5-7)

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Despite the cold outside, the kitchen is warm. The strong rays of clear winter sunlight flooding through the window do not silence the whistling wind outside, but the contrast gives a sense of snugness to the room within.

continued

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In the kitchen warmth, amidst the smells of cooking food, the sound of the radiator and the pots chuckling on the stove, a woman is busy at work. Peeling and paring, stirring and beating, frying and baking. In her mid-sixties now, she is not overweight, but has a pleasant fullness to her form. Wisps of gray and white fleck her once jet black hair. Her face shines with the efforts of her labors, a smudge of flour adorns one cheekbone. Her bright checked apron reveals hints of the dishes already prepared, as do the lingering smells which give the room its warmth.

The hard work of these preparations are no burden to her today. She delights in her sense of purpose; the labor is familiar and gratifying. Cooking has always been one of the ways she has been able to express her love. She hums now as she works.

She is a woman, just like any other woman. She has had her ups and her downs. Until recently, and for many years, she was despairing. For long ago she lost her children. They are each still alive. And each has never been removed from her heart, from her love. Nonetheless, she lost them. They did not leave her at the same time or in the same manner.

She lost one to a spouse. One to his dreams of adventure. Another to her passions and ambitions. One was taken away and imprisoned. One left in anger and frustration. Another with empty promises to return soon (that was long ago). One simply disappeared. One wrote and called regularly – for a while, then less and less, then not at all. One went eagerly. Another, she threw out in disgust.

It had been a long, long time now; many years. Her loss and her grief were great.

Several days ago, when she awoke in the morning, everything appeared different. Perhaps it had been a dream, yet she could remember nothing of the nights' dreams. Whatever the source, she awoke that morning with hope. She awoke with a sense of conviction that soon her children would come home.

At first, she doubted her hope. It had been so many years, and her children had not returned before; why would they do so now? Perhaps the voice of hope was a trick. She had been living alone for a long time; she was familiar with entertaining strange voices, engaging in conversation with angels and the like. Or perhaps, she thought, I am simply getting old and addled.

But instead of diminishing, her hope increased. Until, at last, she succumbed to it, indulged it. That is when she began to prepare for her children's return. Armed with mops, dusters, and polish, she cleaned the house from top to bottom, put fresh sheets on the beds, and laid out clean towels. Although her house was always filled with plants and flowers, she found some more, placing a little vase in each bedroom.

For the first time in many years, she opened the great door in the front hallway. (Alone, she just came and went through the kitchen door). It had been cold, and the week before there had been snow flurries, but no snow had lasted. She swept the front walk clean of leaves, now crisp and frosted, that she hadn't bothered to rake earlier in the fall.

Then she turned to the dining room. She washed her family china, grown dusty from dis-use, polished the few pieces of silver she had, and washed and ironed the linen tablecloth and napkins – even though they had been neatly stored in the cupboard and probably would have looked just fine without doing so.

All while she worked she wondered about her children. How many would be coming? Would they all come? Would they bring friends or spouses? Perhaps they had children now; she often wondered if she had grandchildren.... How will they have changed and aged? One by one she invited them in to pass before her imagination. She considered each one, gently lifting each before her mind's eye, remembering some defining characteristic about them; the way they laughed, or their quick wit, short temper; their hugs, the way they smelled; the way they were when they were very young. Many times before, she had been lost in her memories. But in the past her memory was tinged with sorrow and regret. Today her remembering filled her with anticipation, with hope. She could hardly wait to see them.

Now, with the house all ship-shape she ventured off to the market to lay in a good store of food. That year, Thanksgiving had come and gone with little more than a turkey pot pie in her household, but you would think it was the next day, the way she set to her cooking. Roast meats, fresh vegetables, home baked bread and pies, strong smelling cheeses and fruit of all sorts. A feast for kings and queens, or at least for a very large and hungry family!

As I said before, cooking has always been one of the ways she expresses her love. It is love that prompts this flurry of preparation. As she hums to her work, she remembers a phrase from the prophets: prepare the way; make the paths straight; the valleys shall be filled; the mountains and hills brought low; the rough ways made smooth.

She was doing all that she could. Everything was ready, everything prepared. Her love radiated forth as light, as heat, as a current, seeking out her children wherever they might be, beckoning them home once more.

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Our God, she is waiting and expectant. She has put aside her apron damp from tears of sorrow. She is dressed now in bright and fine clothing, her joy and anticipation shining out. She has prepared the feast, and cleared the path; everything lies ready.

Our God, she is waiting and expectant. As a mother for her motherless children. Shall we return? Oh my sisters and brothers, our mother is waiting; shall we disappoint her once again?

Our God, she is waiting and expectant. O come, all ye faithful. Let us awake, rise up, take one another by the hand, and go home, to her, in peace and great joy. Amen.