

Feast of Saint James
July 28, 2019
St. James, Wheat Ridge

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Poor Baruch.

Talk about your lousy jobs.

Baruch, the son of Neriah, had the misfortune
of being a scribe to the prophet Jeremiah.

It was Baruch's job to write down everything Jeremiah said.

And if you know anything about Jeremiah,
you know that had to be a depressing job.

Jeremiah is the most melancholy of the prophets.

They *all* talked about how God was losing patience,
how the day of wrath was coming.

None of the prophets were what you'd call cheery fellows.

But Jeremiah was especially difficult to take.

And in this morning's Old Testament lesson,
it seems Jeremiah has been going on at some length
about the devastation that's just around the corner.

And Baruch's dutifully been writing it all down.

But finally he's had a bellyful of Jeremiah's doom and gloom.

"Woe is me," Baruch is quoted as saying.

"The Lord has added sorrow to my pain.

I am weary with my groaning, and I find no rest."

I think we can all relate to that, can't we?

Haven't we all had days like that?

Days when sorrow piles up on top of sorrow,
and we feel exhausted,

but even in our exhaustion, we can't seem to rest.

God heard what Baruch said.

and God sent a message to him

through their mutual friend, Jeremiah.

“Baruch,” Jeremiah said,
 “God said for me to tell you that he *is* gonna destroy Jerusalem,
 so if you’re smart, you won’t try to seek great things for yourself.
 It’s not worth the effort because God’s gonna bring disaster on all flesh.
 But here’s the good news: God is gonna let YOU live.”

One wonders how Baruch took this news,
 whether it gave him some small cause for hope
 or just confirmed all his worst fears.

We’re not told how Baruch responded,
 and whether he heeded God’s advice
 not to seek great things for himself.
 But he did remain Jeremiah’s devoted friend and scribe.
 and we know that 18 years later,
 the Babylonians did sack Jerusalem,
 destroy the Temple,
 and they carried Jeremiah and Baruch and a bunch of Jews off into exile.
 It’s not clear how much longer after that Baruch lived.
 But it can't have been easy.
 It was a hard, hard road that Baruch had to walk.

This morning’s second lesson, from the Book of Acts,
 and our gospel reading from Matthew,
 both take place some 650 or so years
 after the time of Jeremiah and Baruch.
 It’s about 30-40 years
 before Jerusalem is going to be sacked again,
 the Temple again destroyed.

In our gospel lesson, we meet the mother of James and John,
 And she clearly has not paid much attention
 to God’s warning about not seeking glory.
 She’s got big, big plans for her boys.
 She wants the best seats in the house for them,
 one at Christ’s right hand and the other at his left.

This request became such a point of contention among all the disciples
 that Jesus had to sit them down and remind them
 that in order to be great,

you must be a servant of all.

In Jesus's words, we hear the echo of God's words to Baruch:
 "Do not seek great things for yourself."

Finally, in the lesson from Acts,
 we read about the death of James, our patron.
 James was killed with the sword,
 on orders from Herod.
 Thus he became the first of the disciples
 to be martyred.

Whoever wishes to be first ... be careful what you wish for.

Baruch and James...

Two servants of God who remained loyal to their callings,
 even though the cost was steep.
 You have to wonder how they found strength and courage,
 what allowed them to carry on in the face of pain
 and fear and grief and weariness.

I know one way people down through the ages
 have found strength and consolation
 in the midst of terrible pain and injustice.
 They find it in music.
 Gospel music, in particular,
 has a way of speaking to our souls,
 of tapping into weariness and heartache,
 and inviting God in to give comfort.

The song we just sang,
 "Precious Lord, take my hand,"
 beautifully captures just how much we need our Lord
 when we are at our weakest and most vulnerable.
 It models how a disciple should respond to weariness and anxiety:
 by reaching out to our Lord.

*Precious Lord, take my hand,
 Lead me on, let me stand.
 I am tired, I am weak, I am worn.
 Through the storm, through the night,
 Lead me on to the light,*

Take my hand, precious Lord, lead me home.

Those are words Baruch might have uttered
when he found himself in exile,
or James might have said,
when he was facing a death sentence.
The words were written by Thomas Dorsey.
Dorsey was born in Georgia in 1899,
the son of a Baptist preacher.
He moved to Chicago when he was just 16,
and started playing in nightclubs.
he was a great jazz musician.

But in 1928, he found Jesus,
and he became active in his church,
Eventually he became the church choir director.

In 1932, he and his wife, Nettie,
were living in a little apartment on Chicago's south side.
One hot August afternoon, he went to Saint Louis
to be the featured soloist at a revival meeting.
He didn't want to go.
Nettie was in her last month of pregnancy
with their first child,
but a lot of people were expecting him in St. Louis,
so he went.

He sang and he sang that night at the revival.
When he finally sat down,
a messenger boy ran up with a telegram.
He ripped it open,
and pasted on the yellow sheet were these words:
"Your wife just died."

He immediately headed back to Chicago.
Nettie had died in childbirth.
and the next day,
his baby son died too.
He buried Nettie and the baby together in the same casket.

Then he fell apart.
 For days on end, he wouldn't leave his apartment.
 He felt God had done him a great injustice.
 He didn't want to serve God any more,
 didn't want to write any more gospel songs.
 He was absolutely lost in grief.

And then one day, a couple of weeks later,
 he sat down at a piano,
 and his fingers began to browse over the keys.
 He remembered an old tune, usually sung with the words
 "Must Jesus bear the cross alone."

Dorsey began playing a little bit with the tune,
 and some words just flowed out of his heart.

*When my way grows drear, precious Lord linger near.
 When my life is almost gone,
 Hear my cry, hear my call,
 Hold my hand lest I fall.
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

A few days later, Dorsey gave the song to a friend back to Atlanta,
 who introduced it to his church choir the next Sunday.
 That was at Ebenezer Baptist Church in Atlanta,
 where Martin Luther King SENIOR had just started as pastor.

His son, Martin Luther King Jr.,
 would just have been about 3 years old on that Sunday in 1932.
 Too young, surely, to remember hearing it then.
 But he heard it sung many times over the next 36 years.
 It became his favorite song.

Often Dr. King would invite Mahalia Jackson, the Queen of Gospel,
 to sing that song at civil rights rallies to inspire crowds.
 On the day he died, Dr. King had gone to Memphis
 to help organize a sanitation workers strike.
 He was making plans to attend a dinner and rally
 at a preacher friend's house that evening.
 He was standing on the balcony at the Lorraine Motel,

and he looked down and saw a saxophonist, Ben Branch,
 who would also be at the dinner that evening.
 He greeted him.

Branch asked Dr. King if there were any song
 he would especially like to hear that night.
 Dr. King said yes, there was: "Take my hand, precious Lord."

Those were the last words Dr. King ever spoke.
 Seconds later, he was dead, killed by an assassin's bullet.
 And Mahalia Jackson sang that song at his funeral.

*When the darkness appears and the night draws near
 And the day is past and gone,
 At the river I stand.
 Guide my feet, hold my hand
 Take my hand precious Lord, lead me home.*

It's not easy being a prophet,
 or being an apostle,
 or recognizing God's true prophets and apostles when we hear them,
 and taking to heart their words to us.
 It wasn't easy in Baruch's day.
 It wasn't easy in James's day.
 It wasn't easy in Dr. King's day.
 And it's not easy now.

We look around at our world today,
 And we wonder if maybe God isn't planning
 To bring another disaster on all flesh.
 I don't know about you,
 But I certainly am growing weak and worn and weary.
 Weary of the meanness I see growing in our culture.
 Weary of the shallowness, the disregard for truth.
 And I'm fearful of what's happening to our climate.
 And I desperately want a prophet to come along
 and speak truth to power,
 to speak out in a way the world will listen to and respond to
 before it's too late.

But you know what?
The truth is, we are all potential prophets.
We each have it within us
To cast off fear and weariness
And respond in hope to the light that still shines in the darkness.

We need not seek great things for ourselves.
We need only to seek Christ,
To remember who it is that holds our hand.
He takes my hand.
He takes your hand.
Pretty soon, he's got the whole world in this hand.

Amen.