

Imagine our liturgical year as a comfortable house. Each season has its space in this home. Maybe Epiphany is the sunroom, full of dazzling light. Perhaps Easter can be thought of as the bath or shower, where we are able to sing with joy as water cascades over us. Maybe that long season of after Pentecost can be thought of as the living room, where we gather to talk about our work, read stories to one another, balance the checkbook, laugh and cry together. Well two weeks ago we left that season of green and entered the season of Advent. We now find ourselves on the front porch. We are watching. We are waiting. We are anticipating arrival.

This morning we find a peculiar companion joining us on this front porch. He calls himself Baruch. His name means “blessing.” He has come to watch with us and tell his story. Now the book of Baruch you will not find among the 39 books of the Old Testament. The book of Baruch is found in the apocrypha, those Jewish writings of the first and second centuries before the birth of Christ. Although Baruch lived much later, the story he wants to share with us on this stoop of watching and waiting goes back to the times of the prophets. The story Baruch tells is of the people of Judah living in exile. He wasn’t there, but he talks as if he were; it is his great-great-great-great-grandparent’s story handed down to him to tell. At the beginning of the book Baruch tells of the people, living outside of their holy land, exiled in a foreign country, bringing all that they have to their makeshift worship in Babylon, and sending this offering to Jerusalem as an outpouring of their very being to God. This once-great nation responds to losing everything by turning and offering themselves up to their God. It is an extraordinary response. It is an act of covenantal relationship. It is an act of creation in seeming loss. We did not hear Baruch tell us this part of the story, but it is integral to what we heard this morning.

What Baruch, “Blessing,” wants us to hear in this time of watching is what we especially need to hear. After describing the offering of the children of Israel and their powerful desire to remain in relationship with God, after expressing the grief of their loss, Baruch says, “Take off the garment of your sorrow.” Isn’t that beautiful? Imagine sorrow as a garment. I tend to experience my sorrow and grief as something deep within. But to imagine that sorrow rising up within and becoming a covering, a cloak. And in my experience sorrow and grief are inclined to have that function – my sadness can be a shield and a barrier. Baruch reminds us that sorrow is just a layer. Grief and sadness are not our skin. They are not our very being. God longs to lift sorrow away, Baruch tells us. God desires to clothe us, with peace, glory, restoration. We are to wear the robe and diadem of joyous relationship with God.

But that is not all that Baruch wishes to share with us. He tells us to look east. (Conveniently, the front porch of Advent always faces east... just in case what we are waiting and watching for might be light). Baruch, “Blessing,” tells us to look east, because there is where the homecoming will come from. He tells us of the gathering of God’s children from east and west, restored, renewed, made right. They all seem to be arrayed with robes of peace and diadems of glory.

From this porch of Advent Baruch reminds us that this will mean hills and mountains must be made low, and valleys must be lifted up. But what we may not be accustomed to hearing is that GOD is the one doing the earth-moving. We are more accustomed to the voices of our other porch companions - Isaiah and John the Baptist - who remind us to take care of our own hills and valleys. Well, there is room for both views on this front porch. Yes, we do need to do some work as we wait and watch. But it is helpful to remember that God is doing far greater work preparing a way for us.

In the growing light of Advent Baruch tells us his wonderful story of being re-clothed, of being re-gathered, of being restored. It is the story of Israel and it is the story of us. Perhaps it is

helpful to remember that this story of Baruch began with offering... Stories of restoration always do. When we think of Joseph and his brothers, when we think of the Prodigal Son and his even more extravagant Father, when we think of 5000+ hungry people fed, when we think of an empty tomb, they all begin with a complete surrender of oneself leading to new life.

Now I don't want to be too glib about this "act of surrender" thing. I certainly don't want to make it seem simple. It takes trust, and trusting – perhaps especially learning to trust God – takes time and experience, particularly when hardship comes. Let me tell you about a recent episode I had with our church cat. Wednesday morning Gabby came into her office (I just happen to be there from time to time) meowing and rolling around adorably for her morning treats. She's got me trained. Well this was the week for her to get her Advantage medicine for fleas and heartworm. It's just a dab of medicine on the back of her neck, but she HATES this. Now what I've been doing is to give her the morning treats, and as she is chowing down I quickly squirt the Advantage on her, and it's done. And so this particular morning as she is rolling around adorably I take out the Advantage tube, open it and set it where I can easily get at it. As I was doing this I also was setting out the treat bag and ooo-ing and ah-ing over them. Well, I placed the treats on the floor, and Gabby took one look at me and bolted out the door. She hid from me all morning. Every time I entered a room she shied away and hid under a table or chair. Oddly, I discovered that somehow she was sneaking into the office, when I would be on the phone or out talking briefly to Darlene. I discovered this fact because slowly the treats I had placed on the floor were disappearing. I put more out, and these treats disappeared one by one as well. At about 3:00 Gabby, who must have been let out, came to the window outside her office. She just stared at me. Then she meowed. I went around to the front door and called her. She slowly walked to the door, and then bolted like lightning through the opening. I took my seat again at the computer, and after about two minutes I became aware of two cat eyes staring at me from the desk a foot away. Gabby casually stood up, pranced across my keyboard – adding her own touches to my report for the Annual Meeting – and curled up in my lap. Relationship was restored.

Now I believe that at times our relationship with God goes along these same lines. Things happen to us or for us that we may experience as hard, painful, challenging. These things may be God's will for us; they are meant to help us, like Gabby's Advantage. There are other things that may occur that God has no desire to have happen. Gabby may get hurt in a cat fight or a fall; that would have nothing to do with me; I would never want that to happen, and truth be told I would be quite upset if it did. She may not know that though. She may think I am as responsible should she fall off the roof as I am for a dab of yucky medicine on her back. I believe that the strains and pains in our relationship with God have much to do with distrusting God's motives and will for us. We have to learn to look for the good things especially for us, lying on the office floor, and to trust that the source of the good only wants good for us. There is no better definition of loving relationship than that. But to make that turn, to find ourselves restored in the lap of God – so to speak – means that first we must come to the window pane, shoot through the door God always holds open for us, surrender ourselves.

Perhaps then it is not so strange that this year's Oblation Sunday has landed in the season of the front porch, the season anticipating restoration. This morning, after the peace, during the presentation, all are invited to bring forward outward signs of how you give of yourself in this place. In the same way that Baruch described the children of Israel we are invited to present these symbols of our offering up of ourselves, these outward signs of God's spirit moving within us. With our hymnals or our rakes or our bobbins or our spatulas in hand we are invited to see in

the dawning east – beyond all hardship and challenge and exile – restoration coming in Christ's ongoing incarnation in and through us. Our oblations – our offerings of ourselves – are actually what put us on the porch in the first place. These are our turning points. In the offering of ourselves we learn what Baruch has to tell us, of that which Gabby reminded me, this great truth of our Christian faith: the source of all that is good only wants good for us.