

2nd Sunday of Advent - year C 2006 - Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

There is a story that has been circulating for some time now.

- a. I have read about it in news papers,
 - b. heard about it on talk shows and radio call-in programs;
 - c. I even heard a sermon about it.
 - d. And yet while even people as close to our president as his commerce secretary Don Evans says it is true, I have yet to find any direct evidence of it from the president himself.
2. The story is that on the night before the decision was made to invade Iraq,
- a. Rather than consult with his aides or advisors,
 - i. President Bush went into a room by himself and spoke with God;
 - ii. and (so the story goes),
 - (1) GOD told him to go to war and rid the world of Saddam Hussein.
3. Depending on whom you hear this story from, you encounter different reactions;
- a. Evangelical Christians are generally edified and pleased
 - b. Secular commentators are generally shocked and horrified.
 - c. But most Americans are surprised and frankly more than a little frightened, that the leader of the most powerful nation on earth would trust foreign policy decisions to something as subjective as personal prayer!
4. And yet that is such a modern reaction; because really for most of history,
- a. Where it was the Kings of Europe
 - b. or the emperors of places as far apart as China and Rome
 - c. people would have assumed that the decisions of their leaders came from God;
 - d. because after all that is who put them there as leaders,
 - i. and it was precisely their power that was the proof of their divine election.
5. This was the assumption the people of Jerusalem made
- a. in the days of the Prophet Jeremiah
 - b. The reason why, when all around them kingdoms were being destroyed by Babylon, they remained, safe and secure
 - i. was precisely because their king was God's king
 - ii. and their city Jerusalem was God's city, where God's house, God's temple was.
6. This was the assumption of the people in the days of the Gospel writer Luke as well.
- a. The list of leaders in today's Gospel flows like a river of power.
 - b. Read it backwards and we can follow it to its source;
 - i. from the high priests, who were manipulated by the local leaders such as Lysanias and Philip,
 - ii. up through Herod, who was manipulated by Pontius Pilate,

2nd Sunday of Advent - year C 2006 - Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

- iii. who was in turn was given his power by Tiberias Caesar,
 - iv. who himself was believed to be by all not merely an Emperor but a God.
- 7. The universal assumption of the ancient world and often in the modern one as well,
 - a. was that God is on the side of the powerful;
 - i. because after all that is who they get their power from.
- 8. But then in the days of Jeremiah the people of Jerusalem saw the Babylonians overrun their city, torture and kill their king and burn their temple to the ground.
 - a. For the people of Jerusalem this was not just a political defeat - but a crisis of faith;
 - i. For they had met an enemy which was even more powerful than their king, and thus more powerful than their God.
 - b. It was in the face of this crushing defeat that the words of this morning's first reading were penned; they are said to come from Jeremiah's secretary, a man named Baruch ,and they are strange words indeed;
 - i. For as Jerusalem is burning and its inhabitants are being forced into exile in Babylon,
 - (1) Baruch is singing a song . . . Not to the people but to the city itself.
 - ii. And it is not a song of mourning, but of joy,
 - (1) calling Jerusalem to clothe itself in glory
 - (a) even as it is being destroyed.
 - (2) To welcome its children back from all over the world,
 - (a) even as they were leaving
 - iii. A song promising that Jerusalem was still God's city where God's glory could be seen,
 - (1) even as it seemed God had forsaken it.
 - c. These words would have stung like salt in the wounds of all those who experienced the destruction of Jerusalem.
 - i. Baruch must have been crazy or at least terribly cruel,
 - ii. to remind the people that they were God's people
 - iii. and their city was God's city,
 - (1) after they had seen that city and their faith destroyed.
 - 9. But then maybe he was just doing what Luke was doing in today's Gospel,
 - a. when after listing all the powerful people of his age he introduces John,
 - i. who is filled with God's power and speaks God's word,
 - b. Promising with words that echo those of Baruch's that one day soon God would

2nd Sunday of Advent - year C 2006 - Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

- c. There was a problem:
 - i. John was not a king or a high priest or an emperor; but a prophet.
 - ii. And he was not speaking in temples and palaces but in all places, a Desert.
- 10. As with a destroyed city, an empty desert was the last place most people would have looked for God.
 - a. But then maybe that was precisely what Baruch was criticizing with his words
 - b. And Luke was fighting against with his Gospel.
 - i. This belief that God is found only among the powerful
 - c. For Baruch, God could be found even amidst the destruction of God's city,
 - d. And for Luke God could be found in the desert
- 11. Because that is where the God of Israel had always been found;
 - a. Not among the rulers but among the slaves
 - b. Not among the powerful but the weak
 - c. Not amidst the glory and opulence of empire,
 - i. but in the burning of bushes and still quiet sounds of the desert.
- 12. Baruch is singing as Jerusalem burns
 - a. because he is preparing them for the day
 - i. when God will turn even this defeat into victory
(1) by raising Jerusalem to new life.
- 13. And Luke is telling the story of John in the desert
 - a. because he is preparing his readers for the birth
 - i. of the one in whom God's power would truly be revealed;
 - ii. But who would be born not in a palace but a stable,
 - iii. and reign not from a throne but a cross.
 - b. The one who would show by his life and his death,
 - i. That God is found not amongst the powerful
(1) but precisely among the powerless,
 - c. Using their powerlessness to show forth God's power and glory.
- 14. We of course cannot know the conscience of another person;
 - a. We cannot know for example,
 - b. if the deaths of three thousand Americans in Iraq and the death of tens of thousands of Iraqis were all based on our president's belief that God told him to invade Iraq.
 - c. But we can and should be deeply skeptical of the belief of some that just because a president, or anyone who has power over us says she or he is following God's

2nd Sunday of Advent - year C 2006 - Baruch 5:1-9; Luke 3:1-6

- d. Why? Because we know in our heart of hearts how God works;
 - i. we know it because we have seen it in our own lives;
- e. In those moments when we have been at our most powerless,
- f. In those moments when everything else has failed;
- g. In those moments when sickness or even death invade our lives;
- h. We are still here; why? because the power of God revealed most clearly in the birth of that child we will celebrate in just two weeks, pulled us through.