2 Advent All Saints’ Church

December 9, 2018 Year C

Baruch 5:1-9 Philippians 1:3-11

Canticle 16 (Luke 1:68-79) Luke 3:1-6

Dear Lord, you shine your light in our darkness and guide our feet into the way of peace.

When I was about 10 years old, my uncle, who had taught me how to swim, gave me a scuba diving mask. I was so happy. I could swim underneath the water, deep as I could go, and watch the activity of the swimmers from below. I pretended I was Sandy and Bud’s sister in my favorite TV show *Flipper*. Holding my breath as long as I could, gave me great delight.

And then one hot summer day, as I was swimming below the surface-waters in the deep end of our local public swimming pool, which was packed with kids, I saw a little girl, bobbing up and down. She was caught between a game the boys were playing with plastic swords and rubber balls, and they were paying no attention to her. She was getting air, but not really, pushed down often by their vigorous play. I came up from underneath her, grabbed her, and quickly reached the pool’s ladder. As we sat on the edge of the pool, I took off my mask and instinctively slapped her back; she was coughing; I remember her blond curls; she was about two.

And then raging out of nowhere, came her mother, screaming and running. She came up to us and gave me a look which I will never forget- a mix of hate, relief, anger, if you had to put words to it, but what I remember was her face completely distorted, like it couldn’t be held back by any normal bone-structure limits. She was like a cartoon character’s mad version of a red crazy panic.

She scooped up her daughter and ran away, screaming, “I found her.”

I was left by the side of the pool. Everything was going on as just before. It was hot, the boys were still playing their water game, people were sunbathing, and I began to cry. I was both terribly afraid and extremely happy. I knew I had done something important. My TV brothers Sandy and Bud would be comforting me, and my TV dad, the Park Warden Porter Ricks, would be proud, and Flipper would be in the distance, dancing in the sea, clapping with his dolphin laugh.

But they were just a fantasy of my imagination. My TV family soon faded, and I began to weep. I felt bereft. I had no words for it, but it was as if I were both the daughter who drowned and the mother who lost her. I wept all day. And I didn’t tell a soul. I felt guilty and ashamed and abandoned…… and important.

Baruch, known to be the scribe, disciple, secretary and devoted friend of the prophet Jeremiah has his own book in the Bible which we read from this morning. He writes about Jerusalem, personified as a mother in grief who has lost her children, Israel. Jerusalem is a mother drawn in anguish. Her children scattered in Exile.

Think about our mothers throughout the world. Mothers at borders, with their children being stripped away from their breasts, or mothers running to schools or nightclubs or synagogues wondering if their children have been mauled down by AR-15 semi-automatic rifles, or mothers after bombs have dropped on hospitals, or mothers in tent-cities watching their children starve, or mothers whose babies drown in swimming pools, or die of cancer, or get kidnapped never to be seen again.

Baruch, which means Blessing, presents Jerusalem as these mothers, drowning in extreme grief, pushed aside, lost, guilty, ashamed, bereft, with the world, seemingly moving on, paying no attention.

And then deliverance. Baruch writes, “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God…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.”

God is paying attention. God is opening the way for these mothers, every high mountain is made low, every valley filled up, a highway through the desert, so that their children may walk safely home in the joy and light of God’s mercy and righteousness.

In the midst of so much madness, defeat, cruelty, and war how do we walk home? Where is home? When we have lost our children, how do we keep hope alive? When the leaders of the world seem not to be paying attention, how do we wake them up to justice and righteousness? Where is our deliverance?

Jesus has one answer. He talks about it in lots of different ways. Yet, he has one answer. One sermon, of sorts, which he describes through lots of different parables: Look for the Kingdom of God, which is in your midst. The reign of God is all that matters. As in heaven and on earth, the presence of the Living God is with you, always. Like Jacob’s ladder, there is a stairway to heaven. Angels, clouds of witnesses, and strangers unaware, will climb up and down to you with comfort. You are never alone; Jesus says: I am with you as God is with me. Embracing this Presence is your life’s journey. You are loved; you are love; God is with you.

As comforting as those words are, sometimes they’re just not enough. The pain is too great. The impossibilities too tangible. The chasm between comfort and heartache too wide. Don’t we all want to be rescued?

Luke, our Gospel writer, is addressing this agony, this cry for deliverance. In the beginning of the birth narrative of Jesus, Luke starts with a litany of power. He names all the leaders of the known world. It’s the Who’s Who of the power brokers, all tyrants of gross immorality, who refuse to shelter widows and sojourners, who will murder their own children to stay in power, who will oversee executions without trial, and who will chop off the heads of prophets just because they call your bluff and name your dishonesty.

All Rulers of Power, ruthless, absolute, holding us ransom in their pockets, to be used to fulfill their needs, when necessary. To hell with mourning mothers.

There is no time chasm here, between the Year of our Lord and the now of 2018. We know these Rulers. They are alive and well and in power throughout the known world. This biblical narrative tells our Truth.

And in the midst of naming the Who’s Who of Tyranny, what does Luke do next? He heralds in the greatest of all leaders: Jesus. The Christ. These others, who think they are leading the world, have no power compared to this babe born in a manger. And he will come with no political agenda, which of course is the most threatening of all. A baby, who comes to us vulnerable and in need, not because he is weak, but because he is Mighty, so mighty he can risk coming with tenderness, forgiveness, love, empathy, and the kiss of peace.

Our peaceful warrior, Jesus will stand in our stead and stand up to this Tyranny, with much Authority. “Where does he get all this Authority?” (This question becomes a mantra throughout all the gospels). And even though they will execute him by crucifying him, they will not defeat him. They never will.

How this is all going to work, isn’t always clear. It’s easy to doubt. Sometimes it feels just too sentimental to trust in Love. Yet, we are being asked to believe in Love and to believe in the Resurrection, and to practice these daily in our lives, as a way to embrace the Present Moment, the Eternal Christ. We need each other to have this kind of faith in our Prince of Peace.

It’s Advent, and John the Baptist is inviting us to our own wildernesses, where we can do this work. Repent, *metanoia*, means to turn around from all the noise and chaos and sinful ways of empty and cruel acts and find the Kingdom of God in our daily living and loving.

When I think about that little ten-year-old girl sitting by the edge of the pool’s wilderness, I see the Kingdom of God. In a flash, I had experienced the precarious nature of life and death, and it left me weeping. Life is precious and cruel and indiscriminate, and I was at one with it… at one moment, the real meaning of atonement, (at one moment) where I was both the mother and the child, in full sympathy of loss and fear and guilt and shame and abandonment. And yet, I knew I mattered. No wonder I wept. It was a Jesus’ moment.

Isn’t this where it all begins? That by touching the lives of others’ pain and fear, we are placed on our own spiritual pathway toward freedom and joy and tears and the real stuff of life and love, aware that our lives are never our own, and yet where we become our True Selves, with the Eternal Christ shining through.

I am reminded of Michelangelo chipping away at stone, saying, “Another few days and life will break through.” He never believed he created his masterpieces; they just emerged. So it is with us, as we let go into “another few days” of being chipped away, hollowed out, and being God’s clay. And who we are as sojourners of love and becoming, emerges, and it’s a beautiful thing- sacred even. Jesus invites us always to live in this Kingdom of God, and sometimes, we will be weeping.

AMEN