

“Setting the Captive Free”
A homily for the people of St. Nicholas with the Holy Innocents by Ethan Jewett
10 December 2006 The Second Sunday of Advent
Baruch 5:1-9 + Philippians 1:3-11 + Luke 3:1-6

A couple of years ago, I was awakened in the middle of the night by a call from my friend, Tom. I could tell by the hour and the distress of his voice that the news was not good. “I just got a call from Walter,” he said. “It seems he’s been in an accident, and he’s killed someone.” In a flash, I knew what had happened. I had seen Walter earlier that night, and he had obviously had too much to drink. The police report identified that Walter had been intoxicated beyond the legal limit, fallen asleep while driving on the Higgins on-ramp for 53 South, lost control of his car, hit a concrete barrier, and killed a woman from the construction crew that was working that night. His life as he knew it was now over. I spent nearly a year after the accident in the courtroom sitting next to Walter, his friends, and his family, as the judicial system tried to respond to his crime and as he tried to wrestle with the life he had taken. It was at about this time two years ago that Walter was sentenced to 10 years in prison for vehicular homicide, just between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Walter’s now serving out his sentence at the correctional facility downstate in Mt. Sterling.

I wrote him a letter this past week, and I confess that I struggled with what to say. I didn’t want to dwell on the event that had put him behind bars, but I was interested in how he was making sense of his incarceration in the grand scheme of his life, and what he was going to do in the future. “God still loves you,” I reminded him. These were the last words I had spoken to him face-to-face in the courtroom before they led him away, and they are the heart of today’s readings. In fact, all of today’s readings focus in some way on a state of captivity and a looking forward to a day when the captive will be freed through God’s love.

The Book of Baruch, who was the servant and scribe of Jeremiah, addresses the suffering of the chosen people during the Babylonian Captivity and describes the glory of their return from exile to Jerusalem. The reading from Philippians alludes to Paul's imprisonment in Rome in AD 61 or 62, his continued bond with the faithful Christian community in Phillipi, and the Second Coming of Christ. Finally, the Gospel reading begins with a rather grandiloquent reminder about the Roman dominion over the Holy Land. In all of these texts, there is captivity: a conqueror and a conquered, a master and a slave, a jailer and a prisoner. But in each circumstance, the captive looks forward expectantly, hopefully to the time when freedom will come, and in each story, preparation precedes fulfillment of God's promise of deliverance.

In Baruch, the nation of Judah is exhorted to "take off the garment of sorrow and affliction." In its place, they are to put on the beauty of the glory of God, the robe of righteousness, and the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting. Paul tells the Philippians that he is praying with joy for all of them. He calls them to continue their good work and to let their love "overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help [them] determine what is best." John the Baptist paves the way for the coming of the Messiah by urging people to repent and seek forgiveness of their sins. Such preparation is presented as a means of getting oneself in a condition fit to greet the new age of freedom. St. Paul frames this as a cleansing process for the individual, "so that in the day of Christ [she or he] may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Calls for purification of this kind are often difficult for modern Christians to grasp. But it is in many ways no different than the discipline required to prepare for a marathon or a detox regimen to redeem the body from a lifestyle of excess. As Bishop Scantelbury noted last week

Advent is a period of expectation. It is also a period of preparation. How we prepare for the coming of the Incarnation, though, depends on how we answer another question: in what ways are we captives? Are you a captive of food? of anger? of materialism? of selfishness? of hunger? of poverty? What is it that makes you feel unstable, off kilter, irritable, or unfocused? What is it that makes you feel less in control of yourself? It is likely that each of us here can think of something that makes us feel like a captive. True preparation, though, requires more than just recognition; freedom requires action and follow-through. I'm sure the members of the AA and GA groups that meet at St. Nicholas would wholeheartedly agree.

I am not going to recommend any particular form of preparation; that is for each of us to decide for ourselves in response to our individual captivity. But I will suggest that we heed Paul's advice to draw upon those strengths within us to free the captive. It takes knowledge and insight, he tells us, but most of all it takes the overflowing love and compassion of Christ. Action that comes from love and compassion cannot help but render us purer, more fit, and more prepared for the Incarnation. But what is so remarkable and compelling about Paul's letter to the Philippians is the way that he is freeing his fellow Christians from their own captivity by praying with joy for them from his prison cell in far-off Rome. And the Philippians' work in support of the Gospel in turn lifts Paul up, freeing him from his captivity. Our preparation of love and compassion, then, is a personal exercise to free ourselves, but it is also an act by which we help to free others from their captivity. Preparation during Advent—whether it is physical, emotional, or spiritual—is, at its best, a reciprocal exercise, between us, our neighbors, and God.

Reciprocity is a fundamental element of freedom, for it forces us to empty some of ourselves to make room for others, just as Jesus did. In emptying ourselves, we are less captives of our own desires, our own needs, and our own interests. For many months, we have been

preparing for the incarnation of our two churches as a single faith community within the St. Nicholas building. This preparation has been marked by much love, generosity, hope, patience, and compassion on both sides, and I have found the increase in visible life-changing ministry generated by this reciprocity very energizing. Others have shared similar observations, and the energy was positively palpable in the St. Nicholas building last week when we prayed with joy together for the first time. Our neighborhood collections of food and Christmas gifts are perfect examples of an Advent preparation that is focused on freeing others from their captivity—from poverty, hunger, want, and isolation. These are acts that are clearly driven by the overflowing love and compassion that Paul wishes for the Philippians. From captivity comes hope for a new and better life, perhaps even for Walter. It is so fitting, then, that our new life together should become official on the Feast of the Baptism of the Lord, when Jesus' own act of purification sets in motion the transformation of the world and the redemption of humanity. May the Advent spirit of preparation live on throughout the year and our evolving life together and free us from captivity. *Amen.*