

Rev. Maeve Hammond
“Every Remembrance”
Baruch 5:1-9 | Philippians 1:3-10
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This second Sunday in Advent really is a treat for us lectionary-followers because we have a chance to study a rarely-read book in the United Church of Christ: Baruch. Why is this? Somewhere along the way in the creation and ordering of our sixty-six-book Bible, church ancestors decided that some books were extraneous to the message and relevance of God’s Word and God’s people. These are books that fell to the wayside for many Protestants, but are still read and revered by some, such as Roman Catholics and Eastern Orthodox Christians. They’re called *apocryphal* or *deuterocanonical* and live in the apocrypha, which you can sometimes find in the middle between the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament, if you find the right edition of the Bible. As my Oxford Annotated NRSV translation puts it,

Etymologically the word [apocrypha] means ‘things that are hidden,’ but why it was chosen to describe certain books is not clear. Some have suggested that the books were ‘hidden’ or withdrawn from common use because they were deemed to contain mysterious or esoteric lore, too profound to be communicated. (1991)

Too mysterious, too esoteric, too profound. In the following sentence, however, the editors of the Oxford Annotated Bible also reveal that some scholars and religious leaders in antiquity wanted these texts hidden because they were too “spurious or heretical” (1991). So, you could say that the apocrypha has had, and continues to have, a controversial nature that makes people feel very passionately one way or another.

The lectionary suggested that we read the fifth chapter of Baruch, one of the fourteen-or-so books in the apocrypha, this second Sunday of Advent. Again, according to the Oxford Annotated Bible,

The book of Baruch was probably written sometime between 200 and 60 BC [now, in my words, a reminder that this was only a couple of centuries at most before Christ was born]; it is set, however, during the Babylonian exile of the early sixth-century BC, and attributed to [the Prophet] Jeremiah’s friend and secretary, Baruch of Neriah. (1991)

The Book of Baruch is a kind of testament or, if you will, conglomeration of other texts from the Hebrew Bible, including the Books of Daniel, Job, and Isaiah (1991). The first section of the book is a corporate confession of sin for Jews in Jerusalem (1991). The second section of the book, where our lectionary reading lands, is a series of poems. This is what we hear Baruch telling the people of Jerusalem in his poem:

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem,
and put on forever the beauty of the glory of God.
Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God;
put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting....
Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height;
look towards the east,
and see your children gathered from west and east
at the word of the Holy One,
Rejoicing that God has remembered them.

Rejoicing that God has remembered them.

Baruch's reassurance and reiteration of *remembrance* speaks a similar message as Paul's Epistle to the Philippians. Both of these texts emphasize *remembrance* as a very divine and very human behavior. It is interesting that *remembrance* comes up for us, the readers of these texts, on the Second Sunday of Advent, a time where we collectively (we and our siblings in Christ around the world) *remember* Jesus' birth, *remember* his parents travails across unknown and foreign lands, and *remember* God's promise of peace.

In Paul's Epistle, he writes to "all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi,..the first church established by Paul on European soil" (1991). In prison and awaiting trial, he says

I thank my God for every remembrance of you, always in every one of my prayers for all of you,...For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the tender affection of Christ Jesus. 9 And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight 10 to help you to determine what really matters.

[pause]

If they were speaking to each other, across time and across place, and constructing a message together, what would it be? What would they say? We have a mysterious, esoteric, profound text from Baruch telling us to rise from where we are, shake off the weight of sorrow

and affliction, peer our heads up and above. What do we see when we do so? We see from every vantage point that God, the divine source of love and creation, has remembered us, God's people. And, then we have a more logical, realistic, instructive text from Philippians telling us that Paul, the imprisoned, itinerant, impassioned apostle of Christ, also has remembered us, God's people. *Remembrance*: very divine and very human behavior. If these two texts were in conversation, it seems they would be telling us that when we remember each other, particularly in times of grief, challenge, and transition, God also remembers us. Where there is remembrance, there is connection. Where there is remembrance, there is unity. Where there is remembrance, there is love. Where there is remembrance, God is beside us, giving us strength.

[pause]

Have you ever taken a moment to think critically about the words "remember" or "remembrance?" There are two parts to the word "remember": "re," meaning "to do again," and "member," meaning "a fragment," "a piece," or "something less than whole." When you combine these two parts, you're invoking the idea of putting a piece back together, kind of like Legos – "re...member." This is a powerful word and powerful concept in the Christian tradition, "remember" and "remembrance." As we always hear on Communion Sundays, what does Jesus say to his disciples? The night before he was arrested, he said, "Do this in remembrance of me." So, when we take communion, we share in the theological and figurative (in our tradition, at least) body and blood of Christ. We recreate a very real moment of Christ's ministry when we sit and partake at the table wherein Jesus and his disciples ate. We honor the millions of people who ate at the same table as we have, continue to eat there, and will eat there when we're gone.

In this way, memory allows us to transcend space and time. It connects us with our former selves. It connects us with our heritage, with our ancestors, and it separates the distance between us and them. In memory—either by mentally recalling the past or by physically doing

something to remember, such as a ritual—that world is no longer as far away from us as it had been.

[pause]

Do you all remember the story of Orpheus and Eurydice? It's a classic Greek myth. Orpheus is our hopeful, optimistic, and romantic hero. He's regarded as one of the best musicians in the world. His specialty? The lyre—just like King David from the Hebrew Bible! He falls in love with Eurydice. On the day of their wedding, just before they're married, Eurydice is bitten by a viper, and she dies. Her soul goes down to the underworld. What does Orpheus do? He does what any of us who have lost someone they love would do: he goes down into the underworld to bring her back. Orpheus pleads with the fates and the gods, begging them to let Eurydice come back with him to Earth. He eventually convinces them in one way: remember the lyre? He plays perfectly, better than he ever has before. All of his passion and his grief are swept up in the strings. The gods have no choice but to let him try to bring Eurydice back. But, the gods aren't so quick to let her go. No, they always have a trick up their sleeves, always a loophole. Orpheus can bring Eurydice back, but only if she walks behind him on the journey and only if he does not turn around—not even once, not even a side glance—to see her. If you know the Greek myth (and, even if you don't, this isn't a spoiler because it's over two-thousand years old), you know that Eurydice does not return to Earth with Orpheus. He can't bear to be without her so much, so illogically, that he turns around to check on her, see if she's okay. Before his eyes, she vanishes. Her soul returns to the underworld. It's only until Orpheus dies that their souls reunite.

This is how the tale of Orpheus and Eurydice goes, from Virgil's Georgics and Ovid's Metamorphosis to the recent jazz-and-blues-inspired, Broadway musical *Hadestown*. (You may remember that I preached on *Hadestown* during one of our summer services a couple of years ago). There is one work, though, that defies the tragic ending: the eighteenth-century opera, *Orfeo ed Euridice* by Christoph Willibald Gluck. In Gluck's rendition, Eurydice is bitten by the

viper, and she *does* descend to the underworld, and Orpheus *does* turn to look at her. But, Gluck's gods, especially the god Amore, are perhaps kinder than those of Virgil, Ovid, and Broadway. They restore her life and bring her back to Orpheus.

There's a podcast from WNYC I like called Aria Code. It zooms in on one aria from well-known operas. Experts from inside and outside of the field of opera and the performing arts analyze the aria's music, libretto or lyrics, and themes. A few years ago, they covered *Orfeo ed Euridice*. Their guests included the famous American author Ann Pratchet, mezzo-soprano Jamie Barton (who played Orpheus at the Metropolitan Opera in New York City), and a writer called Jim Walter, who lost his wife to an aggressive form of breast cancer. Two pieces of their collective commentary on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice and the way Gluck transformed the ending of his opera stood out to me. It felt like the texts from Baruch and Philippians and the commentary by these podcast guests were all speaking to each other, telling me something.

From Ann Pratchet on *Orfeo ed Euridice*:

Grief is such a pure and simple emotion at all range. It can be very loud. It can be very quiet. It's sleeping; it's waking, it's dreaming, it's living. It's so all-encompassing, especially in those first hours, weeks, months, years of loss. You want to find another way to say it, and yet there really is no other way to say it. I want this person back.... I think about how the Orpheus myth has shaped my life and how it's shaped how I think about death. Someone's gone, you can get them back if you just love them enough. You can get them back.

And, from Jamie Barton, the mezzo-soprano:

I really think ultimately Orfeo is about the power of love, quite literally the power of the God of Love [Amore], but also the power of love when it comes to Orfeo and his grief. You really get the sense that Orfeo is completely lost without her. And so I think that the power of love in this is what brings her back.

[pause]

From their perspective, Orpheus's remembrance of and love for Eurydice bring her back. Remembrance and love are the necessary elements in Gluck's opera that allow Orpheus to hold on to Eurydice. Where there is remembrance, there is connection, there is unity, there is love.

When we remember, God gives us strength. Especially in times of grief, challenge, and transition. *Especially in times of grief, challenge, and transition.*

How could the Scriptures and a three-hundred-year-old opera tell us anything about our life today, in this present moment? We're in the second week of Advent. Thanksgiving has passed; Christmas is soon. We may be physically separated from the people we love by death, by distance, or by estrangement, or time apart. We may be spiritually or politically separated from our loved ones—maybe we don't agree, and we can't find a way to reconcile right now, even if we've tried. Maybe our Advent and holiday traditions don't feel like they used to be, like they should be, or like we had hoped. So, maybe we relate to Orpheus or Ann Pratchet or Jamie Barton's account of grief. We may feel like Jerusalem at the beginning of Baruch chapter five: cloaked in sorrow and affliction at the thought of getting through another holiday season without some of the people we love. We may feel like Paul, feeling trapped by distance and circumstance, our hearts and minds somewhere else, with someone else.

I think what the Scriptures are telling us, though, when we do feel like Orpheus or Jerusalem or Paul, is that we can bridge the gap between past and present, between hopelessness and hope, between death and life through remembrance and love. In this way, the past is not fully the past because the love we have for others, for previous parts of ourselves, our previous parts of our lives will continue on and on and on and on, as long as those memories are invoked, as long as we still are around to tell their stories. As long as we remember. Love for others, love for ourselves, and the love of God are all steeped in the very divine and very human act of remembrance. Thereby, it is a right and sacred thing to remember, to recall, to capture and make sense of and make peace with the past and bring some of it into the fullness of the future—especially in times of grief, challenges, and transition. If God remembers us, and if we remember others, we are really never alone, and the past never fully dies away. And, when in doubt, call to mind these familiar words from Jesus: “Do this in remembrance of me.” Amen.