

Sermon preached by The Rev. Charles Rowins at St. Christopher-by-the-Sea, Gibson Island, Maryland, 2nd Sunday of Advent, December 5, 2021.

One of the recurring themes of the Bible is **help in time of need**. And often the “need” is a function of being subjugated to someone else’s power, like a foreign nation.

Sometimes, though, the captor is one’s self. “I’m my own worst enemy” is something that most, if not all, of us have said at one time or another. We get ourselves in trouble. Emphasis on “we” get. We’re responsible.

It’s not as if an enemy surprises us. We simply fail to do what we know we ought to do. And we suffer the consequences. And sometimes these consequences are beyond our ability to overcome them. In other words, we need help, not just to get out of trouble, but to stay out of trouble. “We’re stuck and we can’t get up.”

And where do we look for help? Well, we look for someone with the ability to help and with the desire to help. Both elements are critical. Welcome to the Judeo-Christian Faith.

Yes, at the heart of what we do in public worship and private prayer is the recognition that there are times when we get ourselves in trouble and we can’t get out of trouble. We need a fresh start. Indeed, we need lots of fresh starts.

Most of our services contain an invitation to confess our sins and receive the Lord’s forgiveness. Looking for help is a very human thing to do. And this is why we respond to the Lord. “Yes, I’m stuck and can’t get up by myself, but there is a God who offers a helping hand.” For you and me, that helping hand is Jesus.

Our first lesson today is from the Book of Baruch (**Baruch 5:1-9**). Baruch was the personal assistant to the Prophet Jeremiah. And Jeremiah was one of the helping hands for the Jewish people. They were blessed, as we are, with the freedom to obey or disobey, and, like you and me, they sometimes chose to disobey. And they found themselves in need of help. “We’re stuck and we can’t get up.

Here’s is Baruch’s response to this dilemma: “Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory of God.”

In other words, when you're stuck and you can't get up, look to the Lord for help. Well, looking to the Lord for help is what you and I do when we gather - and when we are alone.

And the Lord's help comes in different forms. For the Jews, there is the promise of a Messiah, a Savior. For Christians, that promise has been fulfilled in Jesus.

This Season of Advent is about expectation. The Christmas Season is about fulfillment of that expectation. From today's lesson from Baruch: "For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that has come from him."

Christians celebrate the arrival of the Messiah. Jews continue to await that arrival. The common ground is the need for help. "We're stuck, Dear Lord, and we can't do what we should do without your help." And even if we believe that you have provided that help, we need more help, because we still get stuck. It is who we are, Lord. Yes, indeed, we need your help."

From today's Letter of Paul to the Philippians (**Philippians 1:3-11**): "And this is my prayer, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God."

Why is it that this 2,000 year-old prayer sounds so current? Well, maybe because it is our prayer too. We get ourselves into trouble that we can't get out of on our own. It's who we are. It's who our ancestors were and who our descendants will be. Every generation has its version of crooked paths and empty valleys and mountains that are tough to climb.

The need for a Messiah is never-ending. But that doesn't mean that the Messiah hasn't already arrived. That's where we are. Our job now, our joy now, is to "greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer."

Yes, our challenge remains that we are stuck and can't get up. But help has already arrived. Advent articulates the need. Christmas articulates the solution. We are people of the past – Jesus died for our sins and rose for our new life – but

we are also people of the present and the future. Today's Canticle (**Luke 1:79**) reminds us that, in thanksgiving, we are "to give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death."

The nature of humans to get stuck will not change. But not without rescue. Enter Jesus. He highlights our need **and** then fulfills that need. How's that for the Love of God! What our final hymn today will describe as "dreadful majesty." A blessing so profound and welcome that it's scary.

Another Advent hymn – one that we sang last week – contains the phrase "pardon down from heaven." That's what we need when we're stuck and can't get up. But we have to accept the offer. God reaches out to us, hoping that we will accept the offer. That exchange is the subject of many great works of art.

Advent is about accepting with gratitude, not passing with indifference. Besides, when we're stuck and can't get up, passing with indifference is the worst possible response. If God in Jesus offers us a helping hand, let's take that helping hand and get on with our lives with renewed confidence. We not only rise with the Lord, but, in the words of the hymn, we "cast away the works of darkness" and become "children of the day."

It's not much of a choice, is it? But we still have to make it. That's the great reminder of this Season. God offers not just a helping hand, but a saving hand. By taking that hand, we can not only get to our feet, but we can extend a helping hand to others. And, what do we say as we offer that helping hand? "The Peace of the Lord be always with you."

Which just happens to be the second of our Advent candles: the **Peace** candle. And we get to share that Peace. What a privilege. Oh yes, there will be times when we get stuck again, and can't get up again. But we don't have to stay there. We have a helping hand in the Lord – if we choose to accept that help.

And when we do accept that help and share that help, we become partners in a really bright future. From Luke's Gospel (**Luke 3:6**): "Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smoother; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God." The Peace of the Lord. Quite a Christmas present. Amen.

Hymns for 2nd Sunday of Advent – December 5, 2021

Hymn 76

On Jordan's Bank

On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh;
awake and hearken, for he brings glad tidings of the King of kings.

Then cleansed be every breast from sin; make straight the way for God within,
and let each heart prepare a home where such a mighty guest may come.

For thou art our salvation, Lord, our refuge, and our great reward;
without thy grace we waste away like flowers that wither and decay.

To heal the sick stretch out thine hand, and bid the fallen sinner stand;
shine forth, and let thy light restore earth's own true loveliness once more.

All praise, eternal Son, to thee, whose advent doth thy people free;
whom with the Father we adore and Holy Spirit evermore.

Hymn 325

Let us break bread together

Let us break bread together on our knees;
let us break bread together on our knees;
when I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us drink wine together on our knees;
let us drink wine together on our knees;
when I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Let us praise God together on our knees;
let us praise God together on our knees;
when I fall on my knees, with my face to the rising sun,
O Lord, have mercy on me.

Hymn 496 – How bright appears the Morning Star

How bright appears the Morning Star, with mercy beaming from afar;
the host of heaven rejoices;
O righteous Branch of Jesse's Rod! Thou Son of Man and Son of God!
we too will lift our voices:
Jesus, Jesus! Holy, holy, yet most lowly, draw thou near us;
great Emmanuel, come and hear us.

Though circled by the hosts on high, he deigned to cast a pitying eye
upon his helpless creature.
The whole creation's head and lord, by highest seraphim adored,
assumed our very nature.
Jesus, grant us, through thy merit, to inherit thy salvation;
hear, O hear our supplication.

Rejoice, ye heavens; thou earth reply; with praise, ye sinners fill the sky,
for this his Incarnation.
Incarnate God, put forth thy power, ride on, ride on, great Conqueror,
till all know thy salvation.
Amen, amen! Alleluia, alleluia! Praise be given
evermore, by earth and heaven.

Lessons for Second Sunday of Advent – December 5, 2021

Collect: Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

First Reading: Baruch 5:1-9

Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God. Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting; for God will show your splendor everywhere under heaven. For God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory." 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. For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne. For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God. The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command. For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of his glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from him.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Canticle 4: The Song of Zechariah (Luke 1:68-79)

Blessed be the Lord God of Israel,
for he hath visited and redeemed his people;
And hath raised up a mighty salvation for us
in the house his servant David.
As he spake by the mouth of his holy prophets,
which have been since the world began:

That we should be saved from our enemies,
and from the hand of all that hate us;
To perform the mercy promised to our forefathers,
and to remember his holy covenant;
To perform the oath which he swore to our forefather Abraham,
that he would give us,
That we being delivered out of the hand of our enemies
might serve him without fear,
In holiness and righteousness before him
all the days of our life.
And thou, child, shalt be called the prophet of the Highest,
for thou shalt go before the face of the Lord to prepare his ways;
To give his people knowledge of salvation unto his people
for the remission of their sins,
Through the tender mercy of our God,
whereby the dayspring from on high hath visited us;
To give light to them that sit in darkness and in the shadow of death,
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.
Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

Second Reading: Philippians 1:3-11

I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for all of you, because of your sharing in the gospel from the first day until now. I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ. It is right for me to think this way about all of you. Because you hold me in your heart, for all of you share in God's grace with me, both in my imprisonment and in the defense and confirmation of the gospel. For God is my witness, how I long for all of you with the compassion of Christ Jesus. And this I pray, that your love may overflow more and more with knowledge and full insight to help you to determine what is best, so that in the day of Christ you may be pure and blameless, having produced the harvest of righteousness that comes through Jesus Christ for the glory and praise of God.

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*

Gospel: Luke 3:1-6

In the fifteenth year of the reign of Emperor Tiberius, when Pontius Pilate was governor of Judea, and Herod was ruler of Galilee, and his brother Philip ruler of the region of Ituraea and Trachonitis, and Lysanias ruler of Abilene, during the high priesthood of Annas and Caiaphas, the word of God came to John son Zechariah in the wilderness. He went into all the region around the Jordan, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins, as it is written in the book of the words of the prophet Isaiah, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight. Every valley shall be filled, and every mountain and hill shall be made low, and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough ways made smooth; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God.'"

The Word of the Lord. *Thanks be to God.*