

Baruch 5:1-9
Psalm 126
Philippians 1:4-6, 8-11
Luke 3:1-6

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Over the past week, we have read, listened to, and watched a lot of commentaries about former President George Herbert Walker Bush. Since his death, much has been written and said about his integrity, honesty, humility, and compassion; his loyal friendships and his sense of humor. These comments were made, of course, in tribute to our forty-first president, but I also detected in them a sense of nostalgia for a time gone by, a sense of longing for values and behaviors that we are not seeing so much of in our culture and in our public discourse today. Integrity is giving way to greed. Honesty is giving way to deceit. Humility is giving way to arrogance. Compassion is giving way to indifference. Loyalties and long-standing friendships are being threatened by a “me first” mindset. Many are concerned. What have we become? Where are we headed? Where is our hope?

Our first reading today, from the Book of the Prophet Baruch, was written to an ancient people of Israel at a time when they were mourning over what they had become. Their nation had failed to live up to its ideals and had lost its identity. The people had lost hope and were lamenting their own ruin. Baruch wrote to inspire these people and to restore their hope. But the people could see no reason for hope other than to place their trust in the mercy and grace of God. So, Baruch called on the people to act on their faith in God rather than on their despair. That was no small call. It was a call for a major shift in attitudes and behaviors. Baruch promised

that God would accomplish what the people could not, and he called on the people to believe in what God could do for them. His was a call to conversion.

In today’s Gospel, Luke presents another call to conversion – that of John the Baptist. Luke wrote that the word of God was revealed to John in the desert, and he presents John as the fulfillment of Isaiah’s prophecy, “A voice of one crying out in the desert,” preparing the way of the Lord, making paths straight and smooth, filling in valleys, and making mountains low. This was again a time of profound anxiety for the people of Israel and elsewhere. They longed for an end to disorder in their world. Corruption was prevalent in their politics, economics, law and religious practices, as well as in their everyday social interactions. The world seemed dominated by evil, much of it at the hands of those listed in the opening lines of this Gospel, and no one could figure out how to counter this evil. But in his preaching in the desert, John affirmed that God was indeed at work, sending a savior for Israel and for the world. He called on the people to be ready for this savior through repentance for their sins. This was not just a call to be sorry for breaking some rules, but to transform their lives, purging themselves of all personal corruption, straightening and smoothing paths, filling valleys, making mountains low – preparing the way of the Lord. That was the point of John’s baptisms, a clean break with their past in an act of total rebirth. In the verses that follow today’s Gospel reading, Luke wrote that the crowds coming to John for baptism asked specifically what they should do. And John said in reply, “If you have two cloaks, share with the person who has none. Whoever has food should do likewise.” To tax collectors he said, “Stop collecting more than what is prescribed.” To soldiers he

said, “Do not practice extortion, do not falsely accuse anyone, and be satisfied with your wages.” As was the case with Baruch hundreds of years before, John’s message was a call to conversion. He called on the people to place their trust in God, looking forward to the kingdom, while they prepared for and began building that kingdom on earth with works of charity and justice.

Like the Israelites of Baruch’s time and of John’s time, we too live in an age of anxiety. Not only are we confronted with division and conflict in our country and in our church, millions of people around the world are victims of starvation, genocide, and other injustices. Many of us and our neighbors are dealing with personal anxieties resulting from illnesses, deaths, broken relationships, and other losses. So, how do we cope? Where do we find hope? We could wring our hands, bemoan our troubles, and live in despair. Or, we can place our trust in God, knowing that God will get us through even the most difficult times. We can also help ourselves and others get through difficulties with our actions – actions of charity, actions to promote justice, and actions to achieve peace. That is undoubtedly where God is calling us in our time.