

LOST CHILDREN



The Scroll of the Prophet Baruch 5:5 "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."

Late one night last week, I watched the 1984 made for television movie based upon Harriette Arnow's powerful novel *The Dollmaker*, starring Jane Fonda, who received an Emmy Award for her performance. It was the story of a strong frontier woman from the Kentucky hills who is forced to uproot her five children to follow her husband to Detroit desperately looking for work during World War II. One setback follows another in their journey, and shattering tragedy strikes the family again and again. The book is a tribute to a woman's love for her children.

There is a scene from the movie adaptation of the story which seared my soul as I watched it last week. For in this one scene, the mother busy cooking for her family in the kitchen,

suddenly realizes that her youngest child had innocently wandered off while she was distracted to play in the railroad yard that lay behind their house. The young mother bursts through the back screen door sensing danger, dashing through the railroad yard, desperately calling out to the child. The viewer sees alternating images of the anxious mother running across the screen frantically calling out the child's name, interspersed with tranquil scenes of the child playing quietly on the railway tracks, surrounded by the familiar sights and sounds of boxcars banging about and the clippety-clap of railroad ties. The mother cries out again and again searching for her child, but the child does not hear her call amidst the noise. And then the viewer slowly becomes aware of a line of boxcars edging backwards slowly towards the child who is unaware of its coming, about the same time that the mother sees it too. The mother screams out wildly and runs frantically toward the unfolding tragedy --- The next image is that of the mother slowly returning towards the house, her face awash with tears, carrying in her arms the limp and bloodied body of her beloved youngest child, all the while wailing and lamenting with a grief that only a mother can know with the loss of one's child. It is a scene of great sadness.

In many and various ways each of us has known that sadness of life, the tragedies it inherently entails, and the loss of those whom we have loved; sometimes it's our children, sometimes

our siblings, sometimes our parents. All of us have lost family members and friends to old age and disease, to accident and misfortune, to the ravages of life and time. None of us will be untouched in this life from these kinds of tragedies, for such loss is a part of the human story and occurs all around us, all the time --- in the surprising and unexpected flash of gunfire in a high school in Oxford, Michigan or with former members of Afghan security forces being hunted down and killed by the Taliban, or in the fear of impending war in the Ukraine, or the silent dying in the busy corridors of our neighborhood hospitals and nursing homes in the midst of this global pandemic. Sometimes their going is quiet and unseen, like old school friends who simply drift away and are forgotten. Sometimes their departure is more dramatic and unexpected, like a break-up with old lovers or the tragic fall of comrades in arms. But none of us shall be untouched by the misery of loss.

The people of Israel knew that kind of tragedy as well. In the year 585 before the Common Era, the Babylonians did what the Assyrians had failed to do earlier; for after a brutal and terrible siege of the city of Jerusalem, where death stalked at the doors and came in at the windows, wrote the prophet Jeremiah, the Babylonians broke through the walls of the ancient fortress of Jerusalem and defeated the armies of Judah and slaughtered most of the city's inhabitants. The Babylonians then carted off into distant exile the political leaders and temple priests of

Israel, dragging them away from their families, from the outstretched arms of their wives and mothers, and from the clinging grasp of their children. Those who were left behind, just enough to bury the dead, but too few to rebuild the walls, wailed and lamented about their tragic loss. And the Old Testament books of Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Baruch are filled with their sad songs of mourning and the sound of their weeping, echoing all too familiar laments of our own lives. How could God have done such a thing? Why has this happened to us? And will we ever see our loved ones again?

And yet in the midst of this despair, the prophet's voice bespeaks of hope. "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. 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 your loved ones are not forgotten, says the prophet. God remembers them. God cares for them. And God will bring them back to you. So, rejoice and sing. For God Himself will lower the high places and raise up the valleys to make level ground, so that your children can walk safely home to you through deserts that will suddenly burst forth

with springs of water and blooming flowers. Rejoice, therefore, and sing.

We, Christians, too, hold tenderly in our hearts this hope in God, that God will remember our loved ones too! We hear the voice of John the Baptist crying out in the wilderness, prepare ye the way, and something within us answers to that call. For we too have seen the tragic face of loss and death, even upon our beloved Jesus hanging from the cross. And yet, we hold tenderly in our hearts the stories of God's power and God's promise, the story of Jesus being raised from the tomb into new life, and the hope of eternal life for all those who follow in His way. '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.'

And so, in this Season of Advent, we Christians prepare for the coming Christmas, we prepare for the coming of our Messiah, and for a fulfillment of those promises made long ago. We Christians rejoice and sing of His Coming again, but we do so not forgetting our lost ones who have gone on before us, not denying or ignoring the pain or tragedy of our losses (for we do not have to always pretend to be happy Christians with plastic smiles, as some do), but instead we can declare in the very midst of our pain and suffering and loss and longing, our hope and our trust in God, that one day we can take off our garments of sorrow and affliction and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.

"I am confident of this," says the Apostle Paul, "that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ" (Phil. 1.9). For "those who sowed with tears will reap with songs of joy," writes the Psalmist (Ps. 126.6). For by virtue of our faith and our trust in God, we can even in the midst of the struggles in our lives, rejoice and sing, longing for God's Advent and the return of our children.
AMEN.