

My name – is Baruch: a Hebrew word which means – blessed. And I do feel blessed in being called by God to proclaim the Good News of his love to his chosen people, Israel.

Perhaps that's one thing you can do during these days of Advent – as you journey toward Bethlehem -- find out what *your* name means – just to see if you are living up to its meaning. . .

The guy who normally preaches to you, Matthew, his name means, “gift of God”. Is he? Well, at least his mother thinks so. . .

So remember the guy who talked with you last week -- Jeremiah [who's name, by the way, means “Yahweh has uplifted” – see I do think a name can really nail a person's personality or purpose sometimes – because he was sent to uplift the people of God by his words]. Anyway, I was Jeremiah's secretary – the one who frantically wrote his words down – because when both his pessimistic and optimistic sides were at work – boy, did the words flow!

Being intimately connected to Jeremiah's words in this way, gave me a distinct edge when God also called me to prophesize to his people --- I had a vast storehouse of wisdom from which to draw from –

a deep well of thoughts which grounded me in the ways of the Lord – as well as the misdeeds of his people!

But make no mistake – I had my own words to speak --- because I had my own task to achieve – preaching at a unique time in Israel's history. There were similar problems that both Jeremiah and I faced – but different circumstances.

I was writing at a time in Israel's history when the Babylonian captivity – a time of slavery and oppression and exile for the Israelites – had finally ---ended. >>

That was the fulfillment of the promise of God Jeremiah was talking about last week – when most of the Jewish people were able to return to their homes in Israel – and thus my words just read to you:

“Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery – stand upon the heights and look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and west” – all returning home!

It was a glorious time of rebuilding – not just the city of Jerusalem – but of rebuilding the covenant relationship between God and his people.

But those back in Jerusalem were not my concern. . . you see, although most were able to return there - - many were not.

Some Jews either stayed in Babylon, or settled elsewhere. They became known as the Jews of the Diaspora – the Jews of the dispersion or permanent exile.

I was writing to them --- the people of God who remained in foreign lands – and mostly took up the issue of how do you remain faithful to God in a hostile environment. How do you resist the idolatrous worship which surrounds you living in a pagan society. . .

Do you ever feel like you are living in a foreign land? You ought to. . .

for as St. Paul reminds you in one of his letters – as a Christian – your true citizenship is in heaven – not on earth. . . And that's why he prays what he does in your second reading today:

“I pray that your love may increase ever more and more in knowledge and every kind of perception, *to discern what is of value*, so that you may be pure and blameless for the day of Christ's coming.”

Do you ever feel like you are living in a pagan, hostile, society? You ought to. . . because the values thrown at you by your culture --- the constant bombardment you get from all forms of the media --- are often times far from Christian values. . .

I would think that is especially true during this time of the year. . . as the frenzy of holiday preparations intensify around you – you are called to patiently wait and watch during the days of Advent – the forgotten season in your culture. . .

As everyone around you is out looking for the perfect buy in the ultimate sale – you are to be looking for the free gift of your savior – already present around you, oftentimes in the most unlikely of places.

So how do you remain faithful – to the God of the covenant who is calling you to much greater things than this world can ever offer you???

Remember the challenge of Jeremiah. . . realize you need the gift of God’s love – and then open yourself to receive the gift of God’s love. Because if you think you can remain faithful all by yourself – with no help from God or no help from a faith community --- then you are, again, doomed to failure.

The people in my day – those who were living in exile – also strangers in a foreign land -- remained faithful by *reading the word of God* – and allowing it to become a part of them – and also relied on their fellow Jews – as they became a tight-knit community which supported one another.

Perhaps you can do the same.

And most of all they remained faithful by remembering that even though they were far from home – they were certainly still **blessed by God** – each and every day of their lives.

So that’s *my challenge* to you this week – reflect on the blessings that God gives you – each and every day of your life. Don’t take people for granted – your family, your friends, your community of faith.

Don’t make the mistake of somehow thinking that you have earned and deserved everything that you have in life – leaving God completely out of the equation as the giver of all gifts.

God has blessed, and will continue to bless – each and every one of you – each and every day. And God’s blessing is complete gift. . . No earns it. No one deserves it. It is just given like the dewfall – falling down upon all.

So this week – recall, reflect, and remember --- **that you are blessed!**

O Come, O Rod of Jesse’s stem. From every foe deliver them. That trusts your mighty power to save. And give them victory o’er the grave.

Rejoice! Rejoice! Emmanuel. Shall come to you, O Israel.