

2nd Sunday of Advent

There once was a man with three lovely daughters, but he found no husbands for them because he had no money, and in those days he had to provide a sizable dowry before each daughter could be married. It seemed hopeless. One night he made a bad decision; he decided to send them into prostitution the next day in order to increase his own wealth. But during the night, he woke up when he heard a loud thud, followed by two more. Some anonymous person had thrown three bags of gold through the window onto the floor of his home. Because of the kindness of a stranger, the man abandoned his immoral and harmful plan. They all lived happily ever after, but not until it became known that the person who had showed him such generosity was the local bishop, a man so holy that today we call him Saint Nicholas. Pawn brokers in the business of rescuing people from taking desperate measures still hang three gold balls on their door in memory of what Saint Nicholas did. We remember his spirit of giving on his feast day, December 6, and under his other name, Santa Claus, the inspiration for much gift-giving each Christmas.

The story of the dowries is legend, but this is true: Christmas inspires people to perform extraordinary acts of kindness toward others. People often do this at times of loss—when an injury happens, when someone in the family dies, or when the innocent cry for justice. Often the gifts of others set right some wrong. Here in Missouri Kevin Strickland was imprisoned on false charges for more than 40 years and exonerated last week. People around the world contributed so much to him that he's now a millionaire.

Every year Christmas shows what a generous world this can be. For one glorious day people who don't often see one another talk to one another, or who don't give gifts suddenly do.

Today's first reading gives a vision of that kind of day. The Book of Baruch addressed Jews of old separated from one another. Some had been captured and imprisoned unjustly in exile; others remained at home in Jerusalem. Those in exile did all they could to keep their faith alive without the Temple or a synagogue. Those in Jerusalem longed to see everyone come back, justice restored.

Baruch addresses this broken-hearted Jerusalem as if the city were a person wearing the black clothes of mourners. "Jerusalem, take off your robe of mourning and misery; put on the splendor of glory from God forever." Then he invites this mourner to run to a place in the upper reaches of the city and look out at the roads leading in from afar: "Up, Jerusalem! Stand upon the heights; look to the east and see your children gathered from the east and the west at the word of the Holy One." Imagine the joy in the heart of Jerusalem seeing all the city's children finally coming home.

That is what Christmas aims to do with no small thanks to Saint Nicholas. It keeps people from bad decisions. It eliminates exploitation. It makes right whatever is wrong. The giving of gifts is one way we bring justice where there was loss. Baruch envisioned a large reunion restoring peace and justice. We can contribute to that if we rescue others from hopelessness this Christmas Day.