

The release of hostage Terry Anderson this week was the answer to many prayers. Anderson spent seven years not just in prison but in chains. Many times his captors tantalized us with indications he might be released. Many times our hopes grew stronger only to be beat down again and mocked. Our world is troubled by hatred between Serbia and Croatia, hunger in the Soviet Union, and injustice in South Africa. In the midst of this world, the release of the last American hostage in Iran proclaims a message of hope.

Today's first reading is strikingly appropriate for this news. The prophecy of Baruch takes up only six chapters of the whole Old Testament. It was written because of the events surrounding the Babylonian Captivity of Israel. In 587 BC Israel suffered a spiritual and political decline. The Babylonians ^(Assyrians?) attacked the ^{Jerusalem} city, destroyed the temple, and carried off large numbers of the population into exile. About 50 years later the Persians conquered the Assyrians and let Israel go free.

In today's passage, the prophet speaks to Jerusalem as if it were a person. The prophet imagines that Jerusalem is a woman in mourning over the loss of her children. We never know what to say when that happens, yet the prophet speaks boldly because he can see that the exile is near an end. He invites mother Jerusalem to remove her garments of mourning, to clothe herself like a priest, to look to the East, and see her children returning home. Those held hostage in the East are now free.

We hear the story of the exile during Advent precisely because it is a story of hopes fulfilled. The whole Advent season is a celebration of hopes fulfilled by the coming of Jesus. Just as the release of the hostages permitted Israel's return to the Promised Land, so the birth of Jesus permits our return to the promised land of heaven.

Our role during Advent is not simply to enjoy this hope fulfilled. Our role is to spread hope. Our role is to proclaim like the prophet Baruch to a world in mourning. To those suffering the dark & cold of winter, to those hurt by the economy, to those trapped by drug abuse, to those fearful of crime — to all who have no hope we say you do have hope. Your hopes have been fulfilled in the birth of Jesus Christ.

The world needs us Christians. The world needs us to point to the Terry Andersons and say, "Look. ^{to the East} Our hostages are free. And you too are free of whatever holds you hostage because of Christmas Day."