

THE EPISCOPAL DIOCESE OF WEST TEXAS

Sunday Readings for Advent 2017

Advent III

Sunday, December 14

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

This is the third week of Advent. If you have a home Advent wreath, you may want to light three candles on your wreath to shine as you enter this time of reflection and prayer. What follows is a simple liturgy for the candle-lighting, drawn from the readings for this week.

Prayers for candle-lighting

The true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world.

[Light three candles]

*I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God.*

The true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world.

Interpreting the Readings

The first verses of the reading for today from the prophet Isaiah are the same ones that the Gospel of Luke records Jesus reading on a Sabbath morning in Nazareth at the very beginning of his public ministry. You can read that story in Luke 4:16-30.

- Sometimes I call this passage Jesus' "mission statement," because it sums up what he is doing throughout the Gospel as he works to free, comfort, heal, feed, and reconcile his people to God.
- As we have observed previously during this Advent study series, Jesus and his earliest followers saw a deep connection between the ancient hopes of the Jewish people during the Assyrian invasion and the Babylonian exile, as expressed in the words of the prophets, and their experiences of oppression under Roman occupation in the time of Jesus.
- You could say that their experiences under Roman rule were like being in exile while remaining in their own land. Under Rome's occupation, the people and land of Palestine were valued only for what they could provide to Rome, and anyone in a position of leadership was pressured to be a part of Rome's system of domination.
- In his words and deeds, Jesus set himself against Rome by expressing God's desire for radical justice (right relationship with one's neighbor) and righteousness (right relationship with God) among the people of God.
- When Jesus stood up to read the Isaiah scroll in the synagogue, he finished by saying: "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing."

- Jesus claimed that in his ministry, empowered by the Spirit, he was enacting the great jubilee proclaimed by Isaiah (“the year of the Lord’s favor”), a time when debts would be forgiven, captives freed, land returned to those who had had to sell it.

- You can hear echoes of the Jubilee in the Lord’s prayer: “And forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6:12).

- Sometimes I picture biblical time as something like a beautiful cloth, folded over on itself multiple times, so that the time of the prophets is folded in such a way that it lies directly over the time of Jesus, which folds and invites us to lay the fabric of our lives directly over his, as we seek, yet again, to align our lives with God’s justice and righteousness in our own day, empowered from within by the Spirit and by Christ.

Later in the week, we will have a chance to return to most of the reading from 1 Thessalonians, so let’s take a brief look at the reading from the Gospel of John. Today’s reading introduces us to John the Baptist, while making it very clear that Jesus - not John - is the Messiah.

- In trying to fill in the gaps of Jesus’ life, many historians have come to the conclusion that Jesus was originally a disciple of John the Baptist.

- John’s baptismal ministry in the Jordan should be seen as a provocative gesture toward Rome, a provocation that resulted in his death not long after the baptism of Jesus.

- The Jordan played a very distinctive role in Israel’s history. The first three chapters of Joshua describe the entry of the Israelites into the promised land by crossing the Jordan. The priests go before the people, carrying the ark of the covenant. As the priests’ feet enter the Jordan, the waters stand up on either side, just as the waters of the Red Sea had parted when the people fled from Egypt.

- John baptized people in the Jordan as an aspect of empowering them to repent and be once again courageously the people of God, zealous for God in the midst of Rome’s rule.

- Like many others, Jesus came to the Jordan to heed John’s call to righteousness and justice. But each of the Gospels seeks to make clear that John’s role was simply to prepare the way for Jesus, who is the one God has anointed to draw all people to God’s self.

- Later in the Gospel of John, John the Baptist will say clearly of Jesus, “He must increase, but I must decrease” (3:30).

For Reflection

The readings for this week are both radically challenging and deeply consoling.

- One way to get a sense for the experiences that lie behind Isaiah's words is to recall a time when you had almost given up hope. Remember that time, and then reflect back upon how you began to find a way forward.
- Were there particular people or experiences that helped you find your way again? Looking back, can you see ways that God was working through these people and events to help you find a path toward renewed life?
- Isaiah describes the returned exiles as overflowing with thanksgiving to God for their rescue: "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God." Perhaps you also have cause to be deeply grateful to God for rescuing you from despair or trouble. Take those words with you today, and make them your own.
- Or, remembering the role of John the Baptist as the one who boldly proclaimed the way for the Messiah, you might want to memorize his words from later in the Gospel of John, "He must increase, but I must decrease." How can Christ increase in your life? Hear these words as an invitation to growth in Christ through the events of this very day.