

Bible Study
Advent 3, Year A
December 11, 2016

[RCL] Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:4-9; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

Contextually speaking, this passage refers to the flowering of the southern desert in Edom, an area below the Dead Sea. Building up to a crescendo that speaks of the final return of those exiled from their holy land, these verses paint a rich portrait of the coming age of fulfillment. The ancient Israelites long held fast to the hope of a messianic future; a time when God's reign would be realized on earth, and all creation would be transformed, returned to its original, pristine state. Additionally, all would be restored to physical and spiritual health (cf vv 4,5,10). It would be a time of peace, harmony and above all, the fullness of life.

We still live in the period of preparation before the full unfurling of God's reign. The work of our hands, guided by God's plan, will further the work of making the desert bloom. While we are all called to play a small role in the furthering of God's vision of peace for the world, each of us is called also to personal conversion; to make our own journey back to the land of God's heart. This is the place where our blinded eyes see, our deafened ears here, and we are ransomed from all that holds us back from being our true selves in God.

- Which word, phrase or image from this passage resonates most with you?
- What are those things in your life that keep you in exile, from living life as the person God intended you to be?

Psalm 146:4-9

Today's psalm echoes the themes of our reading from Isaiah. Scholars suggest that this text was written after Israel's heartbreaking exile in Babylon (587 BC to 538 BC). This contextualizes the praise of the Lord who keeps faith (v. 6), executes justice and sets prisoners free (v. 7).

Note how God is recognized not only as the creative power of the universe, but also as the upholder of the moral order. In other words, the same One who flung the stars from the furnace of creation into the vast expanse also takes a personal interest in the relationships human beings foster among each other.

The narrative arc of Scripture, from Genesis through Revelation, is that Israel's God has made a preferential option for the poor. The psalmist is here praising the Lord who is God of the poor. This stands as a challenge to the apparent values of our own society and to each of us as individuals.

- Which word, phrase or image from the psalm speaks to you?
- While God shows partiality to those who are defenseless – the orphan and widow (v. 9) – to whom do we show partiality? Are the poor among us our chief concerns?
- What, in your experience, places you among the poor to whom God is reaching out?
- Conversely, in what ways does this psalm challenge you to respond to God's option for the poor?

James 5:7-10

The epistle of James contains themes of wisdom and imminent apocalypse. In today's text we see both. The first verse echoes a common theme of the end time (i.e., patience), but follows with an observation rooted in the wisdom tradition – looking to lived experience as a locus of God's revelation. While we as a church no longer wait in anticipation for Jesus' *immediate* return, this short section of James has something to teach us.

First, we are summoned to have faith in the future and trust in God's overall guidance of history. We are being drawn to an age of fulfillment when God's vision of peace for all will be realized. Second, the proper disposition for the coming reign of God is right relationship with neighbor. We will be judged on how well we made the effort to live in harmony with others, especially our fellow Christians.

James ties these themes together by pointing to the faith and long-suffering of the prophets of old. So often they were rejected by their own people for preaching a message of conversion; a message that called for return to the deepest precepts of genuine neighborliness that were the foundation of their Israelite religion. James calls us to carry that mantle in our own time.

- How does James' call to avoid "grumbling against one another" speak to our Christian communities today?
- How does James' exhortation to "be patient" speak to your life experience?

Matthew 11:2-11

Matthew's narrative here is bursting with richness and drama, but only if one understands the contextual clues his first-century listeners were sure to appreciate.

First, John the Baptist is asking questions of Jesus. Why? The answer lies in Matthew 9: Jesus was eating with tax collectors and sinners. To John, this was not acceptable. He called sinners to repent; Jesus appears to be accepting sinners even before they evince any sign of repentance. While Jesus clearly still has great respect for his teacher John, he is no longer preaching John's fire-and-brimstone message of repentance, but rather a message of compassionate acceptance.

Jesus then goes on to praise John by contrasting him with Herod Antipas – the one who imprisoned and later executed John. While not mentioning Antipas by name, Jesus is clearly speaking of him – soft robes, royal palaces, etc. The biggest clue is Jesus' mention of a reed swayed by the wind. The coins that Antipas circulated in Galilee were imprinted with the image of a reed.

The challenge of today's gospel lies in the difference of the approach between Jesus and John the Baptist. Jesus accepts sinners with compassion. He forgives even before forgiveness is asked for (if it's asked for at all). The simple presence of Jesus has a transformative effect on those who gather around him that precedes any action or disposition.

- Consider the ways in which Jesus is present to us today: in the word, the Eucharist and the gathered Christian community. How does his grace have a transformative effect on you through these?

Written by Brian Pinter. This Bible Study was originally posted December 15, 2013.

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