



BIBLE STUDIES THAT WORK

Advent 3 (A)
December 15, 2019

RCL: Isaiah 35: 1-10; Psalm 146: 4-9 or Canticle 15; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11: 2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

“Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened.” These will be not only familiar *words* to many but also a familiar *tune*. Isaiah 35 is featured in the popular alto recitative in Handel’s *Messiah*. As we come to the text today, we pray for fresh eyes. We look upon a scene that describes that which seems unimaginable. The lame walk? The blind see? A highway in the desert? How can this be?

If we look closely, we can see a carefully constructed poetic structure that gives this text immense meaning. The concentric structure reveals the great care in which these verses were sewn together. Verses 1-7 start and conclude with an emphasis on creation. The desert and wilderness are being transformed. Desert blossoms turned as fertile as the watered lands of Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon (vv. 1-2); the arid sands become an immense garden (vv. 6b-7). We see transformation abound as a dry wasteland turns into a lush playground.

Transformation continues in the next layer of the passage. Not only nature is being transformed but also humankind. Hands, knees, and hearts are made strong (vv. 3-4a); eyes, ears, limbs, and tongue are healed and restored (vv. 5-6a).

These bookends of the restoration are beautiful but, much like America’s favorite cookie, the really good stuff comes in the middle. At the center of these restorative texts, which highlight the restoration of creation and humanity, is God. God is coming with power to overthrow disease, disorder, and the wickedness that stands in the way of the breathtaking transformation that will be ushered in.

This text announces that God is in our midst. God is showing up. Sit back and watch the most extreme cosmic makeover imaginable. We live in realities that sometimes feel like desert land; we battle sickness and watch those we love do the same. What if we believed that in Christ, God were in our midst, in the center of our lives and our world, just as God stands centered in our text? What if we believed that God were at work here and is the business of transformation? Wouldn’t this be a great cause for a grand “Hallelujah” chorus in our lives?

- How does this text help us understand what it means “to be saved” as something that not only pertains to individual souls but also the transformation of humanity and creation?
- When our lives seemed to be bookended by dry wasteland and disease and disorder, how can we keep watch for God showing up in the middle of the text of our lives?

Psalm 146:4-9

In Advent, we draw near to the way that God manifested salvation in the birth of Christ. We are invited by the psalmist, in the verses preceding today’s text, to live out our lives with the knowledge that God gives us the gift of salvation every day: “I will praise the Lord as long as I live; I will sing praises to my God while I have my being.” (v. 1b).

The Magnificat, another of the options from today's lectionary, also proclaims praise to God for our salvation. Mary sings, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord, my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." Mary extols the God whose promise of salvation will ultimately be fulfilled in the birth of the child in her womb.

There is majesty in both of these texts, psalms of praise and an underlying relationship to the promises God now brings to fulfillment in this season of Advent. The Lord of the psalmist and Mary is a God of justice among all people. He is the God who sets those in bondage free, restores sight to the blind, lifts up the downtrodden, loves righteousness, and holds great care for the stranger, the orphan, and the widow.

The texts for the third Sunday of Advent proclaim that our hope is the almighty God who gives hope to all and is not only present in these promises but also in the very midst of our daily lives. In the season of the Advent of our Lord Jesus Christ, may we hang onto these words of hope and life and proclaim the praises of the psalmist and Mary and sing a new song. In the words of this Sunday's collect, "Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us."

- In what ways does Mary's Magnificat echo the same refrain as the Psalmist in regard to the nature of who God is?
- As we anticipate God's fulfillment of promises, what does the psalmist have to say about false hope (Psalm 146:3-4)? What does false hope look like in our lives today?

James 5:7-10

As a child, I used to strategically unwrap my Christmas presents that were placed under the tree well before Christmas. I would carefully maneuver the tape off the edges and neatly unfold the wrapping paper on the ends hoping my deed would go undetected. I had a meticulous procedure and the steady hand of a brain surgeon. After I had taken inventory of the goods, I would then, with just as much care, reassemble the wrapping to leave no trace. I had no patience for the coming of Christmas morning. One could say that I was not a fan of Advent.

In our text today, we see patience as the focal point. There are two words that I disdain greatly, especially when they are used together and directed at me: "Be patient." My first thought is, "Easier said than done, do you realize you are talking to the Christmas present bandit?" But James gives us a new way to approach patience, which inspires hope even to Christmas present bandits. The hope that James describes for patience is not achieved by looking upward to some heavenly salvation, nor is it looking inwards to some sort of spiritual illumination, but instead he asks us to look at each other, directly and squarely in the faces of our neighbors.

The patience James is proposing is given by the Holy Spirit and deeply rooted in faith, but it is achieved through community. He exhorts us to strengthen our hearts as a community. We learn patience in suffering as we participate in a common life of faith with one another: not by grumbling, not by backbiting, but by watching and caring for one another.

Although patience is grounded in faith and is undoubtedly a gift of the Holy Spirit, James shows us that patience is also cultivated by deep compassion and love toward one another. Patience means sitting all together, looking longingly at the presents under the Christmas tree, and not grumbling that they can't be opened right now, but rather strengthening each other's hearts, in the hope that the day is drawing near when the greatest present of all will be revealed.

- Who do you consider your community of faith? Who do you consider your neighbor? How can you nurture and encourage patience within these relationships?
- In what areas of your life do you see a lack of patience (e.g. finances, marriage, friendships, parenthood or relationships)? How can you allow God to stir your heart and expose bountiful grace and mercy?

Matthew 11: 2-11

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” These are the words on the lips of John the Baptist from the confines of a prison cell. At first, these words seem unsettling. John knew Jesus – how could he ask this?

In prison now, John is no longer baptizing in the River Jordan or having people come to him. John finds himself in a new desert. After living a life of freedom, he has now entered confinement. From the open wilderness to captivity and with a drastic change of circumstances also comes a drastic change of perspective. Does his question come from true curiosity or disappointment? Is it from doubt or speculation, or could it be asked as a question of trust? We may never know his motive, but the question remains significant for all of us today.

“Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” is the question at the heart of Advent, as we live in a season of anticipation. We, too, find ourselves in the confinement of our limited imaginations about God. We long and hope dearly, but sometimes wonder if the promises given to us by God could really ever come. When the odds are stacked against us and we are up against the wall, this is a question that rings true to us. When we ponder this question in whatever circumstance we are in, we must recognize that it is rooted in a deep longing for the things to come. In this longing, we maintain hope, the hope of what could be and the faith that God is in the businesses of keeping his promises.

- How can circumstances change your perspective and the questions you ask? How have you preserved hope?
- When was a time in your life when you could relate to John’s question? How can we use this question during Advent to re-center ourselves on the hope of God’s promises?

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