

December 15, 2019  
The Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

- <sup>1</sup> The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus <sup>2</sup> it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.  
*The glory of Lebanon* shall be given to it,  
*the majesty of Carmel and Sharon*.  
They shall see the glory of the Lord,  
the majesty of our God.
- <sup>3</sup> Strengthen the weak hands,  
and make firm the feeble knees.
- <sup>4</sup> Say to those who are of a fearful heart,  
"Be strong, do not fear!  
Here is your God.  
He will come with vengeance,  
with terrible recompense.  
He will come and save you."
- <sup>5</sup> Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
- <sup>6</sup> then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.  
For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;
- <sup>7</sup> the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.
- <sup>8</sup> A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;  
no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray.
- <sup>9</sup> No lion shall be there,  
nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it;  
they shall not be found there,  
but the redeemed shall walk there.
- <sup>10</sup> And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,  
and come to Zion with singing;  
everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

*The Book of Isaiah*, together with Jeremiah are the two great prophets of the Bible. We all too often forget that the prophets write poetry, not just in rhyme but word poems that invite us to use our creative imagination to see the world through the eyes of God. Isaiah prophesied during the latter half of the 8th century BCE. His poetry describes a period of destruction (586 BCE) and exile and the return of the people from Babylon to the Promised Land (535 BCE).

*The glory of Lebanon* – we might not think this today, but the majestic cedar and fir trees of the ancient world grew only in Lebanon. They were the largest trees (like our redwoods). Their bark was used medicinally to treat coughs, respiratory problems and asthma.

*the majesty of Carmel and Sharon*. As Lebanon was emblematic of majesty, Carmel was emblematic of beauty (see Isaiah 29:17), and Sharon of fertility (Isaiah 33:9).

Biblicists see in this section from Isaiah a chiasm (or sandwich structure) a "reversal of grammatical structures in successive phrases or clauses – but no repetition of words"

- (a) *The transformation of creation (1-2)*  
(b) *the transformation of disabled humanity (3)*  
(c) *the assertion of God's coming rescue (4)*  
(b') *the transformation of disabled humanity (5-6a)*  
(c') *the transformation of creation (6b-7)*

At the center of the passage then is verse 4: the announcement of God's coming rescue. Everything hangs upon this word from God. Creation and humanity are both in the same pitiful condition, one of drought, or a lack of resources or strength. In the coming of God all - creation and humanity – are given a new gift of life. The impact of this gift is immediate.

Isaiah writes this vision of God's transformative presence and intended wholeness in a poetic form to those living in exile, seeing themselves as trapped-in-a-drought or disabled from what they use to be or be able to do.

The transformed created order praises and worships God – it's a focus on the One who delivers, not on self-sufficiency or self-denial.

they shall obtain joy and gladness,  
and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

## Matthew 11:2-11

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>2</sup> When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples <sup>3</sup> and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” <sup>4</sup> Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: <sup>5</sup> the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. <sup>6</sup> And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

<sup>7</sup> As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? <sup>8</sup> What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. <sup>9</sup> What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. <sup>10</sup> This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,  
who will prepare your way before you.’

<sup>11</sup> Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the *kingdom of heaven* is greater than he.

**The Gospel of Matthew.** The Jewish nature of Matthew’s Gospel may suggest that it was written in the Holy Land, or Syrian Antioch. Since his Gospel was written in Greek, Matthew’s readers were obviously Greek-speaking. They also seem to have been Jews. Many elements point to Jewish readership, yet the gospel maintains a universal outlook. It’s believed to have been written in the 1<sup>st</sup> century, most likely in the Roman province of Syria, maybe in the city of Antioch where there was a large synagogue community at that time.

Matthew’s main purpose is to prove to his Jewish readers that Jesus is their Messiah. He does this primarily by showing how Jesus in his life and ministry fulfilled the OT Scriptures. [www.biblica.com](http://www.biblica.com)

Here John seems confused at the actions of Jesus. He’s that the Messiah that John expected.

John could be depressed, feeling forgotten, as he languishes in prison for speaking so harshly against the sins of the king.

John could also be confused in the acts of mercy and healing that we hear about in Matthew 8 & 9. John’s preaching (as we saw last week) was primarily about calling out sin, and inviting folks to repentance before the last judgment to be brought by the Messiah. “<sup>10</sup> Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

<sup>11</sup> “I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.” – Matthew 3:10-12.

What kind of Messiah then is this Jesus who “went about all the cities and villages, teaching in their synagogues, and proclaiming the good news of the kingdom, and curing every disease and every sickness?” (Matthew 9:35).

John’s question provides an opportunity for Jesus to clarify who he is. To do so, John borrows language from Isaiah 35:5-6 and Isaiah 29:18-19.

Verse 11 is less a criticism of John than it is a proclamation of a new age begun in Jesus – which we see in chapter 10 when “<sup>5</sup>Jesus sent out the twelve disciples with the following instructions: “Go nowhere among the Gentiles, and enter no town of the Samaritans, <sup>6</sup>but go rather to the lost sheep of the house of Israel. <sup>7</sup> As you go, proclaim the good news, ‘The *kingdom of heaven* has come near.’ <sup>8</sup> Cure the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, cast out demons.” – even disciples can do what one expected only the Messiah to be capable of.

## Luke 1:47-55

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

[Having arrived at the home  
of her cousin Elizabeth,]

<sup>46</sup> Mary said,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in  
God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor  
on the lowliness of his  
servant.

Surely, from now on all  
generations will call me  
blessed;

<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has  
done great things for me,  
and holy is his name.  
<sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who  
fear him

from generation to  
generation.

<sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with  
his arm;

he has scattered the proud  
in the thoughts of their  
hearts.

<sup>52</sup> He has brought down the  
powerful from their thrones,  
and lifted up the lowly;

<sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry  
with good things,  
and sent the rich away  
empty.

<sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant  
Israel,  
in remembrance of his  
mercy,

<sup>55</sup> according to the promise he  
made to our ancestors,  
to Abraham and to his  
descendants forever.”

**The Gospel of Luke.** The book of Luke tells the story of Jesus. It is attributed to the physician Luke, who was a traveling companion of the apostle Paul. The language and vocabulary of Luke is one of the most complex of biblical writings, demonstrating the linguistic strength of the author. Luke is thought to be part 1 of a two part book which concludes with the Acts of the Apostles. Luke claims in his introduction to have gathered his story from eyewitnesses, and to have written it down to encourage the faith of believers in Jesus, like Theophilus (a Greek name meaning “one who loves God”) to whom the book is dedicated.

This poetic section is often called “the Magnificat” and appears often in song lyrics and the scene in classic art.

It tells how God will transform the world through the child to come. The language used is very similar (and at times identical) to that of the prayer of Hannah after the birth of her son Samuel recorded in 1 Samuel 2:1-10.

<sup>1</sup>Hannah prayed and said,

“My heart exults in the Lord;  
my strength is exalted in my God.  
My mouth derides my enemies,  
because I rejoice in my victory.

<sup>2</sup> “There is no Holy One like the Lord,  
no one besides you;  
there is no Rock like our God.

<sup>3</sup> Talk no more so very proudly,  
let not arrogance come from your mouth;  
for the Lord is a God of knowledge,  
and by him actions are weighed.

<sup>4</sup> The bows of the mighty are broken,  
but the feeble gird on strength.

<sup>5</sup> Those who were full have hired themselves out for bread,  
but those who were hungry are fat with spoil.  
The barren has borne seven,

but she who has many children is forlorn.

<sup>6</sup> The Lord kills and brings to life;  
he brings down to Sheol and raises up.

<sup>7</sup> The Lord makes poor and makes rich;  
he brings low, he also exalts.

<sup>8</sup> He raises up the poor from the dust;  
he lifts the needy from the ash heap,  
to make them sit with princes  
and inherit a seat of honor.

For the pillars of the earth are the Lord’s,  
and on them he has set the world.

<sup>9</sup> “He will guard the feet of his faithful ones,  
but the wicked shall be cut off in darkness;  
for not by might does one prevail.

<sup>10</sup> The Lord! His adversaries shall be shattered;  
the Most High will thunder in heaven.

The Lord will judge the ends of the earth;  
he will give strength to his king,  
and exalt the power of his anointed.”

## Psalm 146:5-10

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

<sup>5</sup> Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob,  
whose hope is in the Lord their God,  
<sup>6</sup> who made heaven and earth,  
the sea, and all that is in them;  
who keeps faith forever;  
<sup>7</sup> who executes justice for the oppressed;  
who gives food to the hungry.

The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
<sup>8</sup> the Lord opens the eyes of the blind.  
The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
the Lord loves the righteous.  
<sup>9</sup> The Lord watches over the strangers;  
he upholds the orphan and the widow,  
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.  
  
<sup>10</sup> The Lord will reign forever,  
your God, O Zion, for all generations.  
Praise the Lord!

### QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

**These readings have a vivid sense that God's coming, or the coming of the Messiah, will be profoundly transformative. They're relentless in the way that they assert that newness (or change) is indeed possible. We are invited as a community to await this newness, but we can do so only because we remember newness given in the past. Advent – and these scriptures – are a balance between memory and anticipation.**

- **What word, phrase or image grabs your attention?**
- **How do you feel stuck, like dry land languishing in a seemingly endless drought? Like a body that has been disabled by a disease or an accident that longs to be as it once was?**
- **How is our world, city, church, like that?**
- **How do you hear the Spirit of God inviting you to look for newness? To trust in God's transformative power?**
- **How or where do you see God's newness already breaking into our world?**

**The Psalms.** The book of Psalms is a collection of 50 psalms, or songs, to be sung in worship. Believed to have been used in the ancient Temple of Jerusalem, it's like our current Book of Common Worship that we use when we gather for services and celebrations.

Psalm 146 is a hymn of praise, located as a crescendo of a collection of hymns which end in Psalm 150.

The Psalm begins and ends with the Hebrew word Hallelujah – which literally means “Praise the Lord”

**Hallelu-**(is the verb to praise) and **jah-**is an abbreviation of the holy name of God “Yahweh”.

The psalm lifts up the importance of community, and also insists upon the saving love of God which reaches out to deliver individuals (the prisoner, the stranger, the orphan, the widow) from their brokenness or suffering.

One way to fathom the beauty and power of the psalm is to focus on the verbs the song-writer uses:

Yahweh is

- A doer of justice
- A giver of bread
- A liberator of prisoners
- An opener of blind eyes
- A raiser of fallen ones
- A lover of the righteous
- A water of homeless ones
- One who has a special love and commitment to sustain the orphan and the widow (the least of these).

Some of today's writing comes from the entry for the Third Sunday of Advent in *Texts for Preaching. A Lectionary Commentary Based on the NRSV – Year A.*