Worship Resources for December 11, 2016—Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10 or Luke 1:46b-55; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Narrative Lectionary: Spirit of the Lord Upon Me, Isaiah 61:1-11 (Luke 4:16-21)

The prophet Isaiah speaks a vision to the time when the people will return from exile, when God’s promises will be fulfilled, and the people restored. Isaiah uses the images of blossoms in the desert, rivers in the wilderness, and the highway in the desert to show that God is making a way where none could be seen or found. The blind will see, the deaf hear, the lame leap, and the speechless sing for joy—in a time when those who were disabled were cut off from society, this was good news that God would find a way for them. For no one would go astray, and no one would be lost, from the way that God was making.

Psalm 146:5-10 is a blessing for those who put their trust and hope in God. For the same God who made heaven and earth is the God of justice, who restores what was taken from the poor and hungry and releases the prisoners. God looks after the widows and orphans—all who are oppressed, all who are on the margins of society, and God will reign forever.

Luke 1:46b-55 is Mary’s Magnificat, her song of praise, in which God is praised following the good news of her pregnancy and the revelation of Elizabeth. Mary sings of God who fills the hungry with good things and leaves the rich empty. If you are rich, if you have much, if you are powerful—this song does not sing good news for you. Rather, God’s ways of justice are restoration, equity—a leveling out—and for the poor, oppressed, and marginalized—this is good news.

James 5:7-10 looks to the prophets as an example of patience, and reminds the reader to be patient in waiting, for God is near. James reminds the reader not to grumble against others, but rather to look at ourselves, to strengthen our hearts, and to not judge others, because God is the judge who is drawing near.

Jesus responds to John the Baptist in Matthew 11:2-11, for John, in prison, has started to doubt who Jesus is. He wonders if they are supposed to wait for another, because Jesus doesn’t seem to fulfill the image of the Messiah that John had in mind. Jesus sharply replies to John that there is good news—healing and restoration—and if that isn’t the work of the Messiah, what is? But Jesus doesn’t badmouth John for his lack of faith—instead, he speaks to the crowds about John the Baptist, that he is the one who came to prepare the way.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the post-exile Isaiah in chapter 61, bringing good news. God has brought the people out of exile, has turned their mourning to dancing, and will lead them to rebuild what was destroyed. God will make an everlasting covenant with them. The people will be known by God’s blessings, and they are the garden in which God’s blessings are springing to all nations. The people will all become priests and ministers to God, sharing the Good News with all.

Jesus reads the same scroll from Isaiah in Luke 4:16-21, but declares that the words have been fulfilled in their hearing. However, following this passage, after the people at first give their approval for Jesus’ interpretation, they later turn on him when he speaks of good news to the gentiles, and not to those hearing.

God’s justice is good news for the poor and the marginalized, the oppressed and the lost. However, God’s justice doesn’t seem like good news if you are rich, if you are on the inside, if you have power. God’s justice is restorative. God judges with equity. And this is good news for the world, even if it doesn’t seem like it to the powerful and wealthy.

Call to Worship (from Luke 1:46-47,49,52-55)

Our souls magnify the Lord,

 **And our spirit rejoices in God our Savior.**

The Mighty One has done great things for us,

 **Holy is His Name.**

He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

 **And has lifted up the lowly.**

He has filled the hungry with good things,

 **And has sent the rich away empty.**

According to the promises God made to our ancestors,

 **Good News has come to all! Come, worship our Savior as we prepare for His coming again!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Mighty One, we confess before You that Your ways of justice are hard for us. It calls us to look at the needs of others and what we have. It causes us to check our privilege and to remove ourselves from the center. It moves us to bring those on the margins in. We confess that often we do not want to do this. We want to hang on to our privilege, remain in the center of power, hold on to our possessions. Help us to let it go. Help us to trust in You. Help us to move into Your ways of justice, love, mercy, and peace. In the name of Christ our Savior we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Martin Luther King, Jr. said that “the arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends towards justice.” We are being bent towards God’s justice, and when we let go of what holds us back, we find that God’s love and grace will hold us as we bend. Let yourself go, let your worries go, let your reservations go, and bend towards justice. Know that you are loved, forgiven, and restored, for you are God’s beloved. Go in peace, justice, and joy.

Prayer

God of Beauty, God of Wonder, God of Creation: help us to take hold of the instruments You have given us to create beauty in this world. Your image in us is that creative spark that inspires us to write, to make art, to dance, to sing, to build, to dream, to envision. Nurture those gifts in us, so that we might fully rejoice in You as our Creator and Savior. In this season of Advent, as we watch and wait, call us into active participation in Your creative work in this world. May we create something new, as You create something new in us, blossoming into the fullness of Your joy. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.