Worship Resources for December 14th, 2014—Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1:46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

Narrative Lectionary: Light to the Nations, Isaiah 42:1-9 (Matthew 12:15-21)

We begin with Isaiah telling those who will listen that God’s good news is for the imprisoned, the blind, the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the ones captive. Jesus will read from this very scroll in Luke 4, and his mother will give a similar proclamation in Luke 1:46-55 (an alternative reading for the Psalm). God is a God of justice. God loves justice, and will restore what has been lost. There is joy in God’s justice, for the good news is good for all, though it won’t seem like good news to some. To those who are not oppressed, who have not been held captive or imprisoned, release for those who have been won’t seem like good news. But God’s justice is about restoration, not punishment. God’s justice is about reclaiming what was lost and restoring what has been torn down.

Psalm 126 is a psalm of thanksgiving for God’s restoration, remembering that God has provided in the past and God will restore them in the future. They sing of joy, knowing God will fulfill the promises of old, and they who have been empty shall return with their arms full.

Mary sings of God’s justice, the good news to the hungry and the powerless, the poor and the needy, in her Magnificat. This is how she responds when Elizabeth blesses her, how she responds with the blessing of God. Echoing both Isaiah and the Song of Hannah in 1 Kings, Mary proclaims God’s good news—not good news for only her, but rather, good news for the whole world, but especially those who need to hear it. It is not good news for the powerful and the rich. Mary rejoices in what God is doing—not just for her and through her, but through all of the people and for all of the people.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24 contains short statements from Paul of encouragement: Rejoice always. Pray without ceasing. Give thanks in all circumstances. Hold fast to what is good. In other words, know that God is with you, and rejoice, and do what is right, for God remains faithful.

The beginning of the gospel according to John tells of the calling of John the Baptist, the witness to the true light that is coming into the world, and John uses the image of the prophet Isaiah, the voice crying in the wilderness, as a way of describing who he is, and that he is the Preparer. While John has been radical, living the life of the prophets, he insists he is not the Messiah, but the one who is preparing the way.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Light to the Nations in Isaiah 42. The passage upholds the Suffering Servant, who is Israel personified in other parts of Isaiah. The servant will help establish justice, and God’s justice is good news for all those who have been without, who have suffered, who have been in darkness and imprisoned. God’s light will shine, because the people have become the light of all nations.

Matthew 12:15-21 interprets the passage from Isaiah 42 as a way of seeing Jesus as God’s suffering servant, healing and proclaiming Good News to all the people, especially those in need. Jesus will also be hope for the Gentiles as well.

There is Good News in God’s justice—but it may not always seem like good news to everyone. To the powerful, the rich, the ones who have more than enough—they will lose, but to those who are poor, hungry, oppressed—they will be satisfied. It is much harder to be brought down than to be lifted up. It is much harder to lose than to gain. God’s justice is an evening out, raising up the low and bringing down the high. It is restoration to the way things ought to be, and that is not always good news to those who hear it; but it is the Good News of God.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 100)

Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth.

 **Worship the Lord with gladness; come into his presence with singing.**

Know that the Lord is God

 **God has made us, and we belong to God**

Enter his gates with thanksgiving, and his courts with praise!

 **Give thanks to God, bless God’s name.**

For the Lord is good, God’s steadfast love endures forever.

 **God’s faithfulness endures to all generations.**

 **Come, let us worship our God with joy!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Justice, we confess that our ways are not Your ways. We want justice to be punishment, for the people who have wronged us to get what we feel they deserve. This is not Your way. Your ways of justice are about restoration, about healing, about reconciliation. Forgive us when we make justice about ourselves. Forgive us when we ignore the cries of those who face oppression, who are marginalized, who are imprisoned, who are in the valley of the shadow. Call us into the ways of Your justice, mercy, and peace. In the name of Christ we pray all things. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God is about to do a new thing. The rough places will be smoothed out. God is proclaiming good news to everyone. Forgiveness abounds. Love abounds. Rejoice and be glad, and share the Good News! Amen.

Prayer

Almighty God, we come to You in this season of Advent waiting for You to enter our lives and world in a new way, waiting for Your reign to come on earth as it is in heaven. Help us to know we can be part of it now. Help us to know that our working for justice is helping to bring Your reign. Help us not to lose heart, to know that You remain faithful even when we fail. May we rejoice in the Good News of the Gospel: may we rejoice in doing the work of the Gospel. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Today marks the 2nd anniversary of the Newtown shootings. [Here is my original prayer](http://rev-o-lution.org/2012/12/14/a-prayer-for-newtown-ct/). I have family in Newtown, CT, and the tragedy touched me deeply, as it still does for many. Here is a prayer that may be used:

Holy God, You are the God of the innocents, and we remember in this time the joy and wonder of Advent and Christmas, and yet, even in our own Scriptures, Herod slaughters the innocents after the birth of Jesus. It has been two years, and in this time we remember all of the innocents slaughtered by senseless violence–those who were innocent victims of a shooting rampage, those who were killed because of the color of their skin, those who have been killed by our ignorance and false assurance that they were safe. Forgive us for the innocent children who have been killed. On this day, we especially remember the children killed in Newtown, but we lift up all children.

Advent is here, and Hanukkah is coming. Seasons of light in our religious traditions that have been heavily shadowed by darkness. May Your light shine. May we seek peace, and pursue it, as the Scriptures tell us. May we work for justice. May we do all we can to protect the lives of our children: the innocent and vulnerable. May we build a better world, may we live into Your ways, and put the lives of children above politics and rhetoric. In the name of Christ, who was innocent and killed, but rose on the third day; whose birth we celebrate soon, whose parents sought to protect him; may we protect all children like Mary and Joseph cared for Jesus; we pray for all children. Amen and Amen.