Worship Resources for December 15th, 2013—Third Sunday of Advent

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

The thirty-fifth chapter of Isaiah contains beautiful verses of poetry about the return of the exiles. All of creation will rejoice at the return of the people. The prophet encourages the people to prepare for this joyous return, to not be afraid for God will be with them. God will save them, and God will carry them home. The way home will be for God’s people, and no one will go astray. Sadness and grieving will be no more, but singing and joyful celebration will last forever. For a people who have been through so much, these words of the prophet break joy in through the darkness and the suffering.

Psalm 146:5-10 sings of the good news of God for those who look to God. God is the Creator, and also the judge who grants justice: God lifts up the poor, gives food to the hungry, frees the oppressed and watches over the marginalized. This is the God we follow, the God who creates and reigns.

Luke 1:46b-55, the Magnificat, is an alternate reading for this Sunday. There is a great rendition of this scripture by the [Salt Project](http://vimeo.com/79987377) that I encourage you to view and share, or even use in worship! The Magnificat is Mary’s song of praise before Jesus’ birth. Much of her song echoes Hannah’s song upon the birth of her son Samuel in 1 Sam. 2:1-10. Mary sings not of what God is doing for her, but what God is doing for the whole world. She sings of God’s justice, which is not punitive, but restorative—the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. God has remembered the people, and God will do great things. Mary never mentions Jesus in this song, but simply proclaims that God is doing great things for her, and for all people.

Matthew 11:2-11 tells of a time when John the Baptist, in prison, sends his own disciples to Jesus, questioning whether Jesus really is the Messiah. The popular idea of the Messiah was a new king, someone who would come in and establish a new order, who would overthrow the Roman Empire and rebuild the kingdom of Israel. But Jesus comes not to organize an army, but instead healing the sick, raising the dead, bringing good news to the poor and lifting up the oppressed. Jesus comes proclaiming the Good News, but the Good News was not the news the people expected to hear. Jesus praises the work of John the Baptist, but also challenges the crowds to change their expectations of the Messiah and the messengers of God. What God is calling them to do is the work that John the Baptist began: to repent, turn back to God, and seek forgiveness for their sins. Don’t look for the royalty in robes or a warrior on a horse; instead, look to the ones living out the Good News and caring for all of God’s children. This is the work of the Messiah.

James 5:7-10 reminds us that we have to be patient, and not only with God, but with each other. James warns the readers not to grumble against each other. James uses the prophets as an example—the prophets proclaimed the work God was doing and the works God would do—but they often did not see it come to fruition in their lifetime. So we also wait, seeing that God is actively at work now, but that the fruit of our labor may not be in our sight. We have to be patient.

The Good News is the Gospel, and it is given for all people. But to those who have privilege, who have power and wealth, it may not seem like good news. The good news we may want is more power and control, but through the prophets, through Mary, through John the Baptist and now Jesus, we hear that God’s justice is restorative. God will bring down the high and raise up the low. God will fill the hungry and send the rich away empty. God will call us to look to our own sins and seek forgiveness and repent. It’s not easy. It may not sound like Good News at all. But to the poor, the meek, the lowly, the oppressed, the marginalized—this is Good News. This is news that calls us all to rejoice!

Call to Worship (from John 3:16-17):

Hear the Good News!

**For God so loved the world that he sent his only Son**

Hear the Good News!

**So that everyone who believes will not perish but have eternal life**

Hear the Good News!

**God did not send his son in order to condemn the world**

Hear the Good News!

**But that the whole world might be saved through him.**

**Let us celebrate the Gospel News in this time of worship.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Creator God, we have unequally held power and wealth. We have rewarded the rich and the healthy and punished the poor and the sick. We have forgotten the oppressed and the marginalized and focused on what is in it for us. Forgive us for when we are self-centered. Forgive us when we feel entitled. Forgive us when we don’t recognize our power or privilege. Help us to bear the Good News to all people and to live into the Gospel. In the name of Jesus, who offers us forgiveness and restoration, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Our soul magnifies the Lord! Our spirit rejoices in God our Savior! The Mighty One has done great things for us, and holy is God’s name. We are forgiven. We are loved. We are challenged to go forth and live into the Good News. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty God, we struggle with the Good News. We want to be good people and live good lives but it is hard to put others before ourselves. It is hard to see the places where we may have privilege. It is hard to see how the way we live may have a direct effect on other’s lives. Call us into awareness. Call us into right-living. Call us into the ways of justice, so that all people may be lifted up, so that all may receive the Gospel, so that all may rejoice in You our Savior. In the name of Jesus the Anointed One, we pray. Amen.