Worship Resources for December 15th, 2019—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: Rebuilding the Temple, Ezra 1:1-4; 3:1-4, 10-13 (Luke 2:25-32)

Isaiah speaks of the hope of return from exile in 35:1-10. This passage probably belongs with Second Isaiah, after chapter 40, as it speaks of encouragement to those who have waited so long, “be strong and do not fear.” The prophet uses images of people with physical disabilities, including those who are blind, deaf, mute, or paralyzed, to symbolize spiritual limitations. In the time of Isaiah, people with disabilities were often excluded from the greater community, unable or unallowed to participate. The prophet uses these images to show that the limitations have been removed from the people. As twenty-first century readers, we need to focus on the liberation from the limitations of societal participation, for that was the image Isaiah was invoking, not a miraculous curing. All will be called to God’s Holy Way. The unclean—those who will not keep God’s ways—will fall away, but all others will follow God’s holy way into liberation.

The psalmist continues this theme of liberation in Psalm 146:5-10. God is the one who made the whole earth, and also cares for the oppressed and the poor. God executes justice, setting the prisoners free, and feeding the hungry. God watches over those who are marginalized—widows and orphans especially. God lifts up those who have been bowed down, and opens the eyes of the blind—God removes the societal limitations, whatever has held us back from knowing God.

Mary’s song praises God for liberation in Luke 1:46b-55. Mary sings of God bringing down the powerful from their thrones and lifting up the lowly. God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty. God scatters the proud, and looks with favor upon the lowly servants such as she. Mary’s response to God is not only what God is doing for her, but for all people through her.

The short reading from James points to the season of Advent, of watching and waiting for Christ’s return. In James 5:7-10, the writer reminds us not to grumble against one another, to not judge, for the One who judges all is coming. We are called to strengthen our hearts, endure, and wait, for God is coming into our world and lives in a new way.

Jesus is questioned by John the Baptist via John’s disciples in Matthew 11:2-11. John was in prison, starting to wonder if Jesus really was the Messiah. Jesus wasn’t acting like the Messiah many expected, who would overthrown the Romans and rule a worldly kingdom. Jesus tells them to tell John what they have seen—the blind see, the lame walk, the deaf hear, and lepers are cleansed, and the dead are raised. There is nothing that can hold anyone back from God, not even death. All those who are on the margins of society, who have been oppressed, have found good news. They’ve been liberated from the societal limitations placed on them. In Jesus’ day, if you were disabled, you were also poor—you could not work, you could only beg. You were often considered unclean, apart from society. Jesus included them all. Jesus addresses the crowds about John, that he was sent to be the messenger, but rather than revere John who was now in prison, they ought to be concerned about all being part of the kingdom of heaven—especially those who have been left out, especially the disabled, poor, and oppressed.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the rebuilding of the temple after return from the Exile in Ezra 1:1-4, 3:1-4, 10-13. Cyrus, ruler of Persia, allowed the exiled Israelites to return home after the fall of Babylon. The temple in Jerusalem was rebuilt, but it took several years after construction stalling due to disputes among the returned exiles. When it was finally completed, some of the elders, who remembered the first temple, wept aloud, while others rejoiced at the completion of the new temple. There was a mixed response from the people—those who were so glad at the rebuilding, feeling it signified how God had returned everything to the people, and those who wept, because they remembered what it used to be, before the fall of Jerusalem and the exile.

In Luke 2:25-32, an elder named Simeon came to the temple guided by the Holy Spirit, and took the baby Jesus in his arms and praised God. Jesus had been brought by his parents to the temple to be presented, as were all baby Jewish boys, for his circumcision. But the Holy Spirit had told Simeon that this baby was the Lord’s Messiah. He’d waited his whole life for this moment, knowing he would see the Messiah before he died.

Advent is a season of watching and waiting for what God is doing in our world and in our lives. We see the signs of God at work, sometimes in miracles without explanation, but more often in the work of liberation. God is at work liberating us from the forces of evil and sin in this world that hold us back. As Bishop Robert Bannon said, “I don’t think we’ll see Advent correctly until we see it as a preparation for a revolution.” The stories of miracles in the Bible aren’t just to direct people to a wondrous God—they liberate people who’ve been oppressed. Feeding 5000 people liberates 5000 people from hunger. The stories in our Bible that include healing of people with disabilities aren’t about curing disabilities, but about freeing people from society’s oppression. The work of healing happens when we make accommodations and accessibility for all a priority. The work of healing happens when we house the homeless and provide food for the hungry—because good mental health depends on not being afraid of where you are sleeping or where your next meal is coming. The work of healing happens when we can see more than just where our next meal is coming from, but when we can envision a future with hope.

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

Our souls magnify the Lord, and our spirits rejoice in God our Savior.

**For the Mighty One has done great things for us; Holy is God’s name.**

God has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly.

**God has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.**

God helps all those who serve, in remembrance of God’s mercy,

**According to the promises God made to our ancestors, and to us.**

Come, worship God, who is turning the world upside down;

**Worship God, who makes all things new.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Mighty God, we confess that we continue to oppress others through our ignorance. We assume incapability because of disability. We assume poverty is due to laziness. We assume homelessness is due to drugs or alcohol, or blame mental illness or poor planning. Forgive us for our assumptions that are destructive and harmful. Mold us into people with compassion and kindness in our hearts. Quiet our minds that want to jump to conclusions, and instead, create in us a spirit of listening, of openness to the humanity of others. Call us into people of liberation—who seek Your desire to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things, to bring good news to the poor and release to the captives. Stir in us Your Spirit, O God, and break down the oppressive patterns that have infiltrated our lives. Free us to be Your people. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God has liberated us from the power of sin and death through Jesus Christ. As we celebrate the awe and wonder of this season, know that you are free. Death does not have a hold on you. Evil does not have the final word. Love, in the form of a newborn babe, in the form of one who fed five thousand, in the form of one who embraced Mary while she wept at her brother Lazarus’ death, has the final word. Life will go on. The hungry will be fed. The dead will be raised. You are free in Christ. Go and share the good news. Amen.

Prayer

O God, we rejoice that You have given us a Savior! We rejoice that Christ changed our lives and our world forever, and that Christ is at work anew. We rejoice that evil will not have the final word. We rejoice that as long as we live and breathe, we breathe in Your Spirit that makes all things new. We rejoice that the troubles of this present age will not last forever. We rejoice that You continue to work in us, to free us from the sins of this world that oppress and harm. We rejoice that You are moving us into people of compassion, who work for justice for all. We rejoice that the Spirit is still at work, and is doing something new in our world and in our lives, now. Rejoice, and again, we say, rejoice! In thanksgiving we praise You, O God. Amen.