Worship Resources for December 16, 2018—Third Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Zephaniah 3:14-20; Isaiah 12:2-6; Philippians 4:4-7; Luke 3:7-18

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

The prophet Zephaniah, speaking words of hope to a people who’d been led astray by so many rulers and priests before them, speaks of how God has taken away the judgment against them in these final verses. God is the people’s true king, and God is among them. Casting hope toward the future, after the coming exile, the prophet speaks of how God will gather the people and bring them home, restoring their fortunes. The people will turn from shame to praise, and God will end their oppression forever.

Isaiah 12:2-6 is a psalm, a song of praise and assurance of trust in God. God has become the people’s salvation, and what God has done shall be made known among all the nations. God, the Holy One, is present among the people, and they are called to rejoice and let what God has done be known in all the earth.

Paul writes to the church in Philippi to rejoice always in God in 4:4-7. In this closing chapter, despite the persecution the church faced and the inner struggles, they are called not to worry, but to make their requests in thanksgiving to God. The peace of God that surpasses all understanding will be with them.

John the Baptizer speaks to the crowds gathered at the river Jordan in Luke 3:7-18. His message is not one of assurance, but of warning. If they come to be baptized, they must bear fruit worthy of repentance. In other words, this is not a magical ritual, but rather a symbol of the change that must happen within them. It’s not enough to be descended from faithful Abraham. So when they ask John what they must do, he tells them to share out of what they have with those who have nothing. To the tax collectors and the soldiers, he tells them to do their job and not extort anyone, not a penny more than what they are supposed to collect. But when the people wonder if John might be the Messiah, he tells them that one more powerful than him is coming, with a winnowing fork. The winnowing fork separates the wheat from the chaff, and the chaff is burned. But wheat and chaff grow together—it must be separated out of each stalk.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Isaiah 42:1-9. The first of the Servant Songs, Israel is personified as the one who has suffered. God’s spirit is upon the suffering servant, and God’s servant will bring justice. God reminds the people that God has made a covenant with them, taking them by the hand and leading them. God has given the people to be a light unto all the nations, to illuminate the way of God’s justice and peace.

In Matthew 12:15-21, the Gospel writer links Jesus’ ministry with the words of Isaiah 42, speaking of Jesus as the suffering servant. It is important for us to remember that we, as were the Gospel writers, are looking back through the lens of Jesus’ life, reflecting upon who Jesus was and what he did, and finding the words of Isaiah speaking to us through this lens. However, this portion of Isaiah, probably written after the exile, was at least five hundred years before the time of Jesus. Surely the prophet spoke words of comfort and hope for the people of his day. It is important for us as Christians to remember that ours is an interpretation through the lens of Jesus’ life, rather than the prophet Isaiah predicting Jesus five hundred years later. The people of Isaiah’s day found God’s hope in the suffering they had endured.

The season of Advent reminds us of the time before Christ. John the Baptizer came to prepare the way for Christ, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. The prophets also spoke of hope in their day for a people who had suffered, who had been led astray by religious leaders and kings. In the time of Jesus, the people found comfort in these ancient words, and hope that God was doing something new in their time.

Call to Worship (Psalm 33:1-5; Philippians 4:4)

All you who are righteous, shout joyfully to God!

**It is good for those who do right to praise God!**

Give thanks to God with instruments;

**Sing a new song to God, shout with joy!**

For the word of God is upright,

**Every act of God is done in good faith.**

God loves righteousness and justice;

**God’s faithful love fills the whole earth.**

Rejoice in God always;

**And again I say: Rejoice!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we confess that we keep trying to do the same thing over and over again. We keep thinking that if we just do good for a little while we’ll change. If we are kind for right now, everything will be all right. We fail to change completely. We fail to transform our lives to Your ways. We fail to internalize Your commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. Forgive us. Call us to bear fruit worthy of repentance. Help us to turn back to You, to start our lives afresh and to be transformed by Your love, as You have transformed the world through the gift of Your Son, Jesus Christ: love incarnate. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Philippians 4:6-7)

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Go in peace, love and serve God. Amen.

Prayer

God of All Seasons, as we decorate our homes and sing carols, we are mindful that for some this is not a joyful season. This is not a time of wonder and awe, but a time of deep pain and sorrow. We are mindful of those in our midst who have lost loved ones, those who are estranged from their families. We hold in our hearts those for whom this is a difficult time. May we have hearts that understand, minds that listen instead of speak, and souls that are content with disquiet. We know that one day our mourning will turn to dancing, our sorrow to joy. Until that time, be present with us, God of all Seasons, for as the nights grow long in the north and days in the south, we know that all things will shift and change. Amen.