Worship Resources for December 17th, 2017—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: Word Accomplishes God’s Purpose, Isaiah 55:1-13 (John 4:13-14)

The prophet Isaiah in 61:1-4, 8-11 declares good news on behalf of God to the people. Our God is a God of justice, and God’s justice is restorative. What has been destroyed will be built up. Those in mourning will be comforted. While God restores the people, God also holds the people accountable, and will establish a new covenant with them.

The psalmist sings of when the people return from exile, when God restored the people in Psalm 126. Though the planting was done in sorrow and mourning, the harvest time will be joyful, as the people return home. God has done great things for the people, and they will rejoice in what God has done for them.

Mary’s Magnificat is her song of praise to God, for what God will do. Echoing Hannah’s Song in 1 Samuel 2, Mary sings of what God will do for the people, lifting up the lowly, bringing down the powerful, filling the hungry with good things and sending the rich away empty. God’s justice is restorative, and for those who have had their spoils, for those who have lived lives of luxury, God’s justice will seem like hardship, but for those who have been without, they will have their needs met, for God is holy, and God has remembered the covenant made with Abraham and Sarah and their descendants.

Paul concludes his letter to the church in Thessalonica with these encouraging words, to continually rejoice and give thanks, to make room for the Spirit and to hold on to the words of the prophets, holding fast to what is good. These words were meant to encourage the early church, who was waiting for Christ’s return, and knowing that Christ may not come back in their lifetime. Paul encourages them to hold fast in faith and prays for the God of peace to be made known to them in this time.

John’s account of the Gospel has John the Baptist confronted by some of the religious leaders who wondered if he was the Messiah. John the Baptist affirmed he was not, but instead quoted the prophet Isaiah, believing he was the one sent before the Messiah. The leaders asked why John was baptizing, and John declared he was baptizing with water to prepare the way for the one coming after him. The practice of baptism, of the ritual cleansing from sins, came from the Jewish practice of the mikvah, the ritual purification bath. John (and probably others in the Essene community which most scholars believe he came from) adapted this practice in a mass renewal of the faith, believing that the Messiah was among them.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Isaiah 55 and God’s call for the people to turn to what will satisfy them—the everlasting covenant of God. Things of this world pass quickly, but God’s covenant endures forever. God’s words are what satisfies and nourishes, the rich food that the people need. For God’s ways are not our ways, and we need to turn back to God.

Jesus echoes the thoughts of Isaiah in speaking of himself as the water of life in John 4:13-14. Those who come to him will never thirst again, in the way they thirst for righteousness.

God’s justice is not retributive, but restorative. However, it can feel retributive if we are the power-hungry, the wealthy, the hoarders of resources. For God will restore what was intended in creation. God brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly. God’s justice evens out the world as it once was, and for those in power, this will be painful, but for those who have suffered, they will experience God’s created intention.

Call to Worship

Our souls magnify the Lord,

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

For the Mighty One has done great things for us,

 **And holy is God’s name.**

God’s mercy is for those who are in awe,

 **Of all God has done, from generation to generation.**

Come, worship God,

 **Who calls us all to serve and to follow Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We come before You, O God, and confess that we do not practice justice. We do not want to go through the painful process of forgiveness and reparations. We would rather practice a blanket forgiveness that lets us off the hook without having to atone for the places we have benefited. Forgive us for not wanting to do the hard work. Forgive us for wanting to get off easy. Forgive us for the times we hold others to standards we cannot meet. Help us to do the hard work. Give us the strength and courage to practice justice, to look inward and to seek forgiveness for our own wrongdoing. Guide us in your ways of love, justice, and mercy. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God has promised us that our mourning will turn to dancing, our sorrow to joy. Though the journey is hard, if we stick with it, God will see us through. Know that you do not journey alone. The Spirit is with you. Your friends in Christ are with you. Christ has traveled the same journey with you, and will lead you home. Amen.

Prayer

Let our hearts prepare room for You, O God, so that within us, heaven and nature will sing. In the trials of this world, may we still find joy, O God, in knowing You are with us. May we sing and pray and praise Your name, even when we don’t feel it, knowing that joy will come to us, joy will return to us, and joy will be with us always. You are the God in whom we rejoice, and know that all things will be made right. In the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.