Worship Resources for December 22nd, 2013—Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Matthew 1:18-25; Romans 1:1-7

We have reached the last Sunday of Advent. Our passage from Isaiah is about a new king for the people of Israel, one who would be called God Is With Us: Immanuel. Ahaz, the king of Judah, desires to have a sign from God and tells Isaiah to ask God for a sign, and Isaiah tells him that the sign will be a young woman who will have a child named Immanuel. By the time this child is old enough to eat solid food, the child will choose good over evil. However, in this season of Advent we must remember to read these passages from Isaiah in context and to read the whole passage, we understand the hope that Isaiah had for his people in his time—for a king in his day. Isaiah speaks of other signs, of other things to come, that pertained to the people in his time, but we often ignore those to look to images that remind us of Jesus. Our Gospel lesson will refer back to this passage, remembering the hope in Isaiah’s time, and giving Jesus, “He Saves,” the name Emmanuel, “God Is With Us.”

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 is a song pleading for God’s deliverance, as the people have felt God’s absence. They have grieved and mourned and suffered tremendous loss and humiliation. The psalmist pleas for God to restore the people, that the one at God’s right hand—as they perceive their king—will feel God’s presence with them, and lead them into life.

Matthew 1:18-25 is Matthew’s version of Jesus’ birth narrative. After a lengthy genealogy in the first seventeen verses, Matthew’s Gospel tells a different version than found in Luke’s Gospel. Luke tells the story as the women Mary and Elizabeth experience Mary’s pregnancy and proclamation from God through the angel Gabriel. Matthew’s story includes more about Joseph, and Joseph’s intention of divorcing Mary after her pregnancy was known. Joseph, not unlike his namesake in the Hebrew Scriptures, experiences a vision from God through a dream, discovering that Mary is pregnant because of the Holy Spirit. Matthew quotes Isaiah, saying that this happened to fulfill what was said by the prophet. Matthew, however, takes one verse out of the section and uses it as a way of pointing to Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures. The writers does this throughout this Gospel, and it’s always a good idea to read the entire passage in context, as Matthew skips over other details in the Hebrew Scriptures. But what we learn is this: the writer of Matthew and many other early Christian writers saw Jesus as the Messiah, and looking back in the Hebrew Scriptures, found verses and images that reminded them about Jesus.

The letter to the Romans begins with Paul’s declaration that Jesus is the Messiah, promised by God through the prophets and the scriptures, descended from David, who has come to bring resurrection from the dead and grace to all people. Paul is giving his statement of faith as a welcome to the Roman church that he has not yet met. Paul is clear about what he believes about Jesus, and what the Gospel is, and who the Gospel is given to, especially including the Gentiles along with the Jews; but Paul is clear most of all about who Jesus is, declaring boldly that Jesus is declared to be the Son of God (vs. 4).

We have reached the moment where we read the story of the Incarnation: God among us. But we struggle in reading all of our Scriptures. Our early Christian ancestors looked back in the Hebrew Scriptures and the prophets speaking of hope in the time of exile, the prophets who looked to new kings and saw hope for new leadership—these seemed to remind the early Christians, especially our Gospel writers, about Jesus. And we have read these specific passages from Isaiah throughout Advent, passages about the future king of Israel; the early Christians saw these qualities of a Godly king in Jesus. But some of the Gospel writers, including Matthew, took verses out of context to proclaim that the prophets were talking about Jesus, and we have to be careful to understand that. As Christians, we must confess and acknowledge that in our rush to find Jesus in the Hebrew Scriptures, we have claimed that our interpretation is the true one and that our Jewish brothers and sisters interpretation is false. We have carried out atrocities in the name of Jesus. Instead, as Christians we ought to look to the Gospel accounts of Jesus, rejoice that the prophet’s description of their ideal king has many similarities with Jesus, and also rejoice that Jesus came not as an earthly king, but as the One who leads us into life, and the hope of resurrection. Jesus is not the one that Isaiah hoped for in his time, but Jesus is God with us.

Call to Worship:

The day we have been waiting for is almost here!

 **Jesus has come, and Jesus is coming again!**

The time we have been expecting is almost fulfilled

 **Christ has come, and Christ is doing something new!**

The news we have been waiting to hear has almost arrived

 **The Gospel of Jesus is the Good News of God’s Love**

 **We worship and celebrate the Good News of God’s Love for us all, revealed to us in Jesus the**

**Christ!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Time, Space, and All Creation: we confess that we have put our own expectations, desires and demands upon the Scriptures, upon others and upon You. We have made You into our image. We have turned Your Scripture to say what we want it to say. We have picked over and chosen bits of tradition and history to claim as Truth while ignoring the rest. Call us to repent. Call us to seek forgiveness. Call us to seek Your guidance on this journey of faith, to let go of our need for power and control. In the name of the God who came as vulnerable as any of us come into this world, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Emmanuel, God is with us. There is no place we can go where God is not with us. There is nothing we can do that will cause God to abandon us. There is no darkness where God’s light cannot shine. We are loved, forgiven, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

Love Above All, in the north this is the darkest day of the year; in the south, this is the longest day of the year. Light shines in the darkness, and darkness cannot overcome it. God, You are coming into our world as light into darkness. Help us to grow in the light to see You at work in new ways, in our world and in our lives. Word That Became Flesh, help us to live more fully into this life of promise that You have created us for, that You have blessed us with. Be born anew in us this day and every day. Amen.