Worship Resources for December 8th, 2019—Second Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12

Narrative Lectionary: Isaiah of the Exile, Isaiah 40:1-11 (Mark 1:1-4)

Isaiah prophesizes a new king in 11:1-10. This new king shall come from the line of Jesse, the line of David. Where a stump has been due to the downfall of the kings since David’s time, a shoot shall spring forth from that stump. The Spirit of the Lord will be with the new king, who will have wisdom and understanding, who will judge with righteousness and equity. This new king will bring peace, restoring the balance of creation’s intention.

The psalmist gives a blessing for a newly anointed king in Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19. The blessing includes charges to the king: to judge the people with righteousness and the poor with justice, to defend the needy and poor and to crush oppression. The psalmist calls upon God to bring prosperity and peace to the king’s reign, and concludes by blessing God, the one who does marvelous things for the people.

Paul begins to wrap up his lengthy letter to the Romans in chapter 15, reminding them that the scriptures they have known teach them of God’s steadfast love and encouragement. Paul calls upon the church in Rome to welcome one another, especially the Gentile believers, just as Christ has welcomed them. Christ was made known to them so that they might in turn welcome others. Paul reminds them that the one Isaiah prophesied in Isaiah 11:10 was a king for all nations. Paul interprets the messianic passages as promises of God’s salvation for Gentiles as well as Jews.

Matthew’s Gospel interprets the image of the voice crying in the wilderness in Isaiah 40:3 as John the Baptist in Matthew 3:1-12. John appears in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming that the kingdom of heaven has come near and for the people to repent. John baptizes the people in the river Jordan, where they confess their sins—but when Sadducees and Pharisees come to him, he warns them that they must bear fruit worthy of repentance. John is concerned that they think their group is in the right, that because they are children of Abraham they do not need to repent. Sadducees and Pharisees were at odds with each other theologically, and politically in terms of Jerusalem. John tells them that one more powerful than himself is coming after him, one who will have the winnowing fork in his hand, ready to separate the wheat from the chaff, ready to separate out the sin within us. But the axe is lying at the root of the tree—if the fruit of repentance isn’t there, the tree is worthless.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Second Isaiah, which scholars use to distinguish Isaiah 40-66 from 1-39 (some scholars also used Third Isaiah for Isaiah 55-66, though it may be the same writer as Second Isaiah, just later in life). Second Isaiah begins after the exile into Babylon, as the Babylonian Empire fell to Persia and Cyrus, ruler of Persia, began to allow the exiles to return home. This prophet, who took on the mantle and name of First Isaiah, speaks words of comfort to the people. God is going to lead them out of the wilderness and God will care for the people. Like a shepherd, God will feed the people, caring for the lambs and carrying the youngest.

The beginning of the Gospel according to Mark begins with the words of the prophet Isaiah, and identifying the voice crying out in the wilderness with the prophet John the Baptist, who came out of the wilderness and proclaimed a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins.

A voice is crying out. Repent, for the reign of God has drawn near. Believe in the Good News. Turn back to God, and you’ll find God is right there. We are waiting in this season of Advent for Christ to come again, but Christ is already with us, now. The reign of God is here, now. We are participating now and waiting for the fullness of God’s vision to be realized. Believe now in the good news, for it is coming.

Call to Worship (from Isaiah 40:1-5; Matthew 3:2-3)

A voice cries out, “Prepare the way of the Lord.

 **Make a path, direct and straight through: a way for our God.**

Every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain made low.

 **The uneven ground shall become level, the rough places a plain.”**

God is restoring what has been unequal, uneven, unjust;

 **God’s glory shall be revealed, and all people shall see it together.**

For God has spoken through the prophets:

 **“Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.”**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We confess, O God, we are like those that gathered at the river with John. We want to believe. We want to be part of Your coming kingdom. But we do not want to change. You have called us to repent, and we dig our heels in. You have called us to come into the water, but we are afraid to stick our toe in. You have called us to bear fruit, warned us that the axe lies at the root of the tree, but we fail to bear forth Your goodness and mercy in us. Forgive us. Help us to make the first move in faith—to turn back to You, to wade into Your waters of new life, to blossom in justice, mercy, and hope. Help us to repent and to believe in the Good News, for Your reign has drawn near. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

The seeds God has planted in us are always ready to break forth, no matter the season. There is always time to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. You always have possibility dwelling within you. Know that your mistakes, your shortcomings, your hesitations are forgiven. Just strive to do better. Love more, forgive more, show mercy more, give grace more, for our God is abundant in love that encompasses us all. Go and share the good news. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, in this season of bright lights and busy streets, may we sit in the darkness and shadows and silence. In a season of parties and food and cheer, may we remember what it is like to be hungry and to go without. We know our neighbors are sleeping outside in the cold. We know parents do not have enough food for their children. We know many are lonely. Call us into the holy work of this season, to lift up the lowly, to fill the hungry with good things. Help us to heed Your voice and Your way of justice, mercy, and love by participating in Your reign now, and preparing for what is to come. We pray in the name of Christ, is who coming into our world and lives in a new way. Amen.