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## *Commentaries on Advent Lectionary Scripture Texts for Year B*

### **First Sunday of Advent**

#### **Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19**

First note the structure of this psalm. There is a threefold refrain, the repetition is practically identical, in verses 2, 7 and 19. A similarly worded refrain occurs in verse 14. In these refrains there is a play on the word turn and return. In the refrain of verses 2, 7 and 19, the prayer is for God to return the people (the NRSV translates restore, thus missing the word play). In the refrain of verse 14, the cry is for God to turn. The returning of the people depends upon the turning of God. God's grace enables the human response.

In this psalm, the community gives voice to its sorrow at the destruction of the nation and of Jerusalem. Their grief is all the greater because of their history in which God's grace and saving action has been evident. Note the recital of past history in verses 8-14 where God's grace toward Israel is described as the growth of a luxuriant vine. The fertility of the past forms a bleak contrast with the ruins of the present. Life as they know it has come to an end.

In this situation of despair the cry comes once more to God to save Israel. This saving action is described as God once again caring for the vine. In the Hebrew, the ending of verses 15 and 17 is virtually identical. This does not show up in the NRSV which omits the second half of verse 15 (see their footnote; they regard the end of 15 to be a scribal error.) In the NJPS we find these two verses translated as follows: the stock planted by Your right hand, the stem You have taken as Your own. (v. 15) Grant Your help to the man at Your right hand, the one You have taken as Your own. (v.17)

In verse 15 the petition is that God would once again care for the vine which was planted by God's right hand and which was adopted as God's own. In verse 17, the parallel petition is aid for the one at God's right hand, whom God has adopted. In the restoration of the community, the community as a whole needs to become vibrant along with the leader, the one empowered by God.

In this lament, as in others, the underlying conviction is that God alone is the one who is able to save. The community is dependent upon God's grace for their existence. They do not pray to be strengthened to withstand their present trouble, nor do they ask for wisdom as to how to live in these troubled times. Rather, they cast themselves upon the mercy of God and proclaim their faithfulness to this God. (The NRSV unfortunately begins verse 18 with then. The NJPS translates more accurately, We will not turn away from You; preserve our life that we may invoke your name.) Restoration and revival of the community of faith begins with acknowledging dependence upon God and that we are not masters of our fate, nor can we fix all that is wrong.

Perry B. Yoder

#### **Isaiah 64:1-9**

Formally considered, these verses form part of a community lament. This part of the lament is in three parts. It opens (I) with an appeal to God to intervene as in the past, when God did glorious deeds (vv. 1-5a). The mood shifts in the middle of v. 5, which introduces (II) a description of the community's dismal spiritual condition and a confession of sin (vv. 5b-7). The

text concludes (III) with a confession of trust and another appeal to God (vv. 8-12). These verses include a description of the community's dismal material circumstances (vv. 10-12), though our selection includes only vv. 8 and 9. Breaking off at v. 9 has the effect of excluding the very reason for the lament: God's continuing silence in the face of suffering and devastation.

As is characteristic of biblical laments, this one proceeds from faith: in the confidence that God will hear and answer and act (see the Comments on Psalm 80). But here that confidence is threatened by God's prolonged absence and inaction. The community attests their faith that God can act to set things right; they remember that God has acted in the past, and they also acknowledge their own sins. But they also protest that their sin followed God's anger (Isa 64:5b). [Unfortunately, it is impossible to be certain what the last part of v. 5 says; compare NRSV with RSV.] The community has all but lost faith, "because you have hidden your face from us" (v. 7). This is their dilemma: To whom can they complain of God's absence-but to God?

They complain and appeal to God as "our father." Nowhere in the Old Testament, outside of Isaiah 63 and 64, is God addressed as "our father," but these two chapters address God in that way three times (63:16, twice, and 64:8). Indeed, Isa 64:1-12 is part of a longer lament that begins in chap. 63. In 63:16, part of the community complains that "Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not acknowledge us," in other words, some are being excluded from the community (cf. 66:5). "Yet," they say, "you, O Lord, are our father." Or, as 64:8 says, "But you, O Lord, are our father. . . , all of us are the work of your hands." In Hebrew, the phrase "all of us" occurs four times in this lament (64:6, twice; 64:8, 9). In its misery, its sin, its trembling faith, but especially as God's fractured people, the community is emphatically one-it has one creator, one Lord, one father. None are to be excluded from the Israel of God.

God's advent in Jesus Christ was in the dark of night. Isa 64:1-9, and the larger lament of which it is a part, speaks from the darkness and in darkness. It speaks in the absence of God, whose face remained hidden. And it speaks, in desperate hope, of a community that includes "all of us" whose maker is God.

Ben C. Ollenburger

### **1 Corinthians 1:3-9**

Paul's letters normally include a thanksgiving section immediately following the opening greeting. Galatians is a noteworthy exception. Even in a letter such as 1 Corinthians, where he addresses moral issues and major conflicts in the congregation, Paul expresses gratitude to God in his opening thanksgiving (1:3-9).

In a significant sense the thanksgiving section also serves as a foreword, which announces the major themes and concerns of the letter as a whole. Among these is the matter of the charismata or gifts of grace and their function within the congregation. When reading the letter one soon senses that the Corinthian converts (at least some of them) display a cocky and boastful attitude concerning their spiritual giftedness (see 4:6-8). In the thanksgiving statement Paul mentions the gifts of speech and knowledge (1:5) and he admits that the Corinthians are not lacking in any spiritual gift (1:7). However, some interpreters detect a pungent note of irony here; perhaps Paul is echoing the Corinthian's boast about how spiritual they were.

In this opening thanksgiving Paul begins to address and challenge this attitude of spiritual elitism among certain believers in Corinth. How does Paul chide those whose boasting implies that they have already arrived as kings and queens in God's kingdom? Paul essentially reminds them of Advent: God's reign has not yet been fully established on the earth; God's people still await more to come!

An Advent sermon which features this text could reflect on the life of the congregation as a richly endowed community which still longingly awaits God's further empowering work in its life and witness. The following emphases could be highlighted:

- With Paul we worship God and express our gratitude to God, whose grace extends to us in Christ Jesus (1:4). This is at the heart of the meaning of Advent and Christmas: Emmanuel,

God with us (Matt. 1:23); the Word made flesh, dwelling among us, full of grace and truth (John 1:14). Ultimately Paul thanks God (not the Corinthians), whose faithfulness (God is faithful, 1:9) is communicated in the Christ event. Who then can boast? At the end of the opening chapter, Paul recapitulates: "Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord!" (1:30)

- Jesus Christ is the one whose trust in God even unto death on the cross is attested in the gospel which Paul had preached in Corinth; indeed, Paul asserts that this testimony of Christ was confirmed among them (1:6) and was now bearing fruit among them (1:7). Paul's proclamation of the message of the cross (from all appearances foolish and weak, yet ultimately wise and powerful, 1:18-25) also invites the Corinthians in the fellowship of God's Son (1:9) to entrust themselves humbly (not boastfully or arrogantly) to God.
- Paul urges believers to take a posture of active anticipation of the climactic revelation of Jesus Christ as Lord (1:7), confident that God will faithfully sustain them to the end on the day of our Lord Jesus Christ (1:8). During Advent the community of believers becomes aware anew that God is not finished with us yet. Neither a smug attitude of spiritual superiority (as in Corinth) nor a dull desperation about the messes in our individual lives or the world around us can co-exist with that awareness.

Jacob W. Elias

### **Mark 13:24-37**

Why this text for Advent? The text as a whole points to end-time consummation, not to the Advent of the Messiah's birth. True, it ends with the wakeup call to watch, *gregorete*, repeated three times—quite appropriate to Advent. In this respect it echoes the urgency of Mark 1:14-15, which is a wakeup call to hear the Gospel Jesus proclaims. Coming at the close of Jesus' ministry this discourse prepares his disciples for persecutions and trials to come that will accompany their witness to the gospel. In the end, after these tribulations, God will vindicate the elect.

The text motivates alertness and endurance. Heaven and earth may pass away but God's word will not pass away. Further, there is the fig tree indicator. When you see it shoot forth its leaves, you know that summer and fruit-time is at hand. Even the figure of the Son of Man coming on the clouds of heaven is a signal that the time of consummation is near (see 14:62 where Jesus presents this indicator and claim to the religious leaders). This figure clearly denotes the victorious consummation of Jesus' mission and God's vindication of his work.

The connection between Advent and this anticipation of consummation is not forced. Jesus' coming as Messiah begins a revelatory stream of events that anticipates that culminate Jesus' gospel ministry in Galilee and Jerusalem. It is also striking to note how the different time-moments are telescoped into each other. Two examples occur here. The coming of the Son of Man has special fulfillment in Jesus' own passion (8:31; 9:31; 10:32); Jesus' death and resurrection are clearly in view here. But then 14:62 and 13:25, in our text, seem to point ahead to another coming, or the future impinging upon the present so as to make it relevant for now, in the decisions and response of humans to Jesus.

Tim Geddert, author of *Mark (Believers Church Bible Commentary)* emphasizes the relation between Mark 13 and discipleship, so prominent in Mark's Gospel. The call to alertness and vigilance is the continuing training in discipleship. Followers of Jesus continue their cross-bearing and humble service for Jesus and the kingdom until the end-time. Jesus promises his power and presence.

The threefold call to watch in our text recurs in the passion narrative, in Jesus' call to the disciples in Gethsemane, in 14:33, 37, 38. The same *gregorete* occurs, calling the disciples to be on alert for the passion crisis, and Jesus' imminent end in his earthly life.

The text shocks by saying that no one knows the timing for the consummation—even the Son does not. We are not to emphasize matters of sequence and time, but the certainty of the salvation drama that will take place when we don't expect it. Therefore be awake, alert at all

times. And beware (blepete, used four times in ch. 13, vv. 5, 9, 23, 33), lest you are consumed by the diversions of history, deceptions of evil, and cosmic upheavals, and thus are caught off-guard.

So in this Advent season, let us be alert, awake, ready, and not diverted by the cares of this world, the deceitfulness of riches, and the complications of life. Let our lions be girded, ready for the end at all times. Let us welcome the Messiah, come anew in Advent.

Willard M. Swartley

## Second Sunday of Advent

### Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

Psalm 85 begins by directly addressing God, reminding God that Israel's sins have been forgiven in the past. The past history of the individual and community is the foundation for both the present petition and future expectations. In the past God has been gracious. The appeal is that God's grace once more be extended to the people. It is the story of God's salvation that gives hope to a present in which grace and salvation seem absent. The belief in God's faithfulness is warranted, in part, by the history of God's faithfulness. Present circumstances do not ultimately cast this faithfulness in doubt.

The middle part of the psalm, verses 4-7, is the petition, the appeal of the psalmist to God for action. Note the similarities between verse 4 and 7. These two verses form something of an *inclusio* for this central petition section. The request is once more for God to show mercy and save.

The final part of the psalm, verses 8-13, expresses the psalmist's commitment to wait for God's word in the confidence that God will once more restore the fortunes of Israel. It is thought that a prophet or a priest would relay a message from God to the petitioners. Note the incident in Jeremiah 14. The people are praying for relief in a time of drought, but the word comes to Jeremiah that God will not answer their appeal, and furthermore, disaster will come upon the nation rather than well being. The opposite word is requested by the psalmist here!

What the psalmist expects is *shalom*, verse 9. *Shalom* here involves the residence of God once again in the land, verse 10, the presence of faithfulness, righteousness, and peace, verses 11-12, and the return of material prosperity, verse 13.

The motif word in this section is righteousness; it occurs in verses 11, 12, 14. It occupies a key position in the final verse as that which prepares the way for God's coming—it makes a way for God's steps!

The notion of righteousness is an essential part of the future expectation in the Old Testament. Note for example passages like Isaiah 9:7 where peace, justice and righteousness are joined. In Isaiah 11:3-5 and Jeremiah 23:5-6 we find the common pairing of justice and righteousness. In these passages, it seems clear, that righteousness when yoked with justice has the connotation of rightness. When God comes to earth, God will set things right. As part of setting right, God will bring justice as well as fertility to the land. God's presence affects both society and creation.

Perry B. Yoder

### Isaiah 40:1-11

These verses, so familiar from Handel's *Messiah*, introduce Isaiah's book of comfort, which extends through chap. 55. Framing this material are statements about God's word; 40:8 announces that "the word of our God shall stand forever," while according to 55:10-11 God's word will succeed in accomplishing God's purposes. In between, God's word encounters, and counters, two complaints from the people who are to hear it. First, they complain that God is powerless and unfaithful<sup>3</sup> that they are beyond God's reach and that God has ignored them

(40:27). Second, they complain that God's solution to their resignation and fear is not acceptable: it is unprecedented and impossible (44:24 - 45:13). Would we not think so, too, if told that an Iranian was God's shepherd and messiah (44:28; 45:1)? Nevertheless, the prophet announces that God the creator has chosen Cyrus, the Persian king, to rebuild Jerusalem and the temple, both of them destroyed by Babylon, where the exiles from Judah remain.

In the logic of the ancient world, the destruction of Jerusalem, and of the temple on Mt. Zion, meant that God had abandoned them<sup>3</sup>had abandoned God's own house and dwelling place, and the people who worshipped there. Isa 40:1-11 announces God's return. The text is in two parts: in 40:1-8 the prophet hears a series of voices in the heavenly court or divine council, and receives a commission to speak (see Isa 6:8-9); in 40:9-11, that commission is delivered to the personified Jerusalem/Zion itself.

God is the first to speak (40:1-2). Note that the verbs ("Comfort, O comfort...") are plural. Those in attendance are instructed to announce the end of Jerusalem's punishment. One of these, "a voice," then gives instruction to prepare the Lord's way of return through the wilderness, which involves the transformation of nature and results in universal acclamation (40:3-5). Yet another voice says, simply, "Cry out!" (NRSV), or "Declare!," addressing one person. The prophet responds, with a sense of futility: he objects, What should I say, since people are like withering grass and fading flowers (40:6-7)? Another voice speaks, acknowledging the prophet's point: Yes, grass withers and flowers fade; but the future does not depend on the strength or constancy (on the faithfulness) of people, it depends on the word of our God, and God's word endures forever (v. 8); it accomplishes God's purposes (55:10-11).

Remarkably, it is the abandoned Zion and the ruined Jerusalem who receive the commission to be God's heralds—the evangelists of advent, of God's return to Judah's languishing cities (40:9). What all the world, including the Jews themselves, regarded as abandoned, desecrated, even as a woman divorced by God (Isa 50:1; 54:5)<sup>4</sup>Zion/Jerusalem<sup>4</sup>is entrusted with the good news: the tidings of great joy, "Behold your God (RSV)!"

God comes in triumph, armed to rule, but also as a shepherd carrying lambs and leading mother sheep (40:10-11). The imagery in these verses seems to us contradictory, both militaristic and tender: God as mighty warrior and as gentle shepherd. In this way, too, Isa 40:1-11 prepares us for advent—for the advent of our shepherd destined to crucifixion and to rule as Christ the king.

Advent, when it is Christian, celebrates and anticipates the advent of our God, who—Isaiah is eloquent testimony to this—can never be domesticated to our expectations.

Ben C. Ollenburger

## 2 Peter 3:8-15a

An apocalyptic text like 2 Peter 3 is likely to be bypassed in most congregations. The theme of God's judgment does not rank among the favored sermon topics, especially during the consumer-oriented hoopla of Christmas preparations. Nor does the thought of a cosmic annihilation by fire intrigue us while we string decorative lighting around our homes. The tender and hopeful message of comfort in Isaiah 40 seems much easier to market.

This sense of embarrassment is heightened for some preachers by the fact that other preachers seem to delight in preaching from apocalyptic passages. For this latter group, 2 Peter 3:8 appears to provide a neat mathematical formula for how God reckons time: one day equals thousand years. With this kind of formula and a considerable dose of inspired imagination the apocalyptically oriented preacher can mine the scriptures (especially passages like 2 Peter 3) for data concerning the timing of the dramatic events associated with Christ's triumphant return and history's end.

A more faithful approach to this type of text is to recognize the literary character of apocalyptic and the contextual factors which shape it. Apocalyptic literature utilizes highly symbolic language. Engaging in literal readings of those texts which employ imaginative symbolic references is to misread the text. Second Peter mentions the thousand years (3:8), and

replays Jesus' metaphor concerning the elusive thief (3:10; cf. Matt. 24:43; 1 Thess. 5:2), and refers to the dissolution of the heavens and the earth (3:10,12; cf. Matt. 24:29,35), but the pervasive use of picturesque images and symbolism within contemporary Jewish apocalyptic writings leads to the recognition that these references in 2 Peter are also to be understood as symbolic. The original hearers in their social and political contexts would likely have known this.

What then is the message of this text for our churches during the season of Advent?

- Second Peter warns against an attitude which regards God as irrelevant or as out of the picture. Whether such attitudes derive from the pervasive secularism and consumerism of our day or from another 20th century "ism," this text reminds us that God is still sovereign, and judgment will come, and human choices have their consequences.
- Yet God desires to restore a repentant people rather than destroy a stubborn and rebellious people who have been lulled to sleep by the fact that life seems to go on seemingly without consequences for the wicked (3:9-10). God's patience testifies to this desire for salvation for all (3:15a).
- Second Peter therefore urges the readers of the letter to live holy and godly lives (3:11) and to be zealous to be found at peace, without spot or blemish (3:14). This calls for due attention to life style and moral uprightness and participation in God's mission of peace and righteousness. Such is the stance appropriate for Advent: active waiting for the new heavens and new earth in which justice dwells! (3:13)

Jacob W. Elias

### **Mark 1:1-8**

In these eight verses Mark begins his Gospel with fast-paced anticipation of the coming of Jesus the Messiah. Mark awakens us by three layers of anticipatory signals.

First, there is the title, which uses the word "gospel," in the phrase "the beginning of the gospel." The word "beginning" could mean first in a chronological series or first in the sense of an archetype. Here it means that there is "more to follow." But does the "more to follow" inferred by the title refer to these eight verses, to the first fifteen verses, Mark's introduction, or to the entire book? Commentators have made strong cases for each of these. My inclination is that it primarily indicates the first eight verses, but secondarily to the whole book. Just as the first verses anticipate the Messiah as an early layer of anticipation, so the whole book sets forth the Messiah and the gospel in an archetypal manner. It sets forth the nature and shape of the gospel.

The word gospel rings two bells for the reader. Those who inherited Israel's Scriptures knew Isaiah 52:7, which speaks of the messenger who proclaims the gospel, the gospel of peace. Those who knew the Greco-Roman culture would have heard here a royal bell ringing forth news from the imperial court, that a royal son is born or victory was won in battle. In both cultures, the word "gospel" rang bells of royal hope and expectation. Thus the word, Jesus the Messiah/Christ.

The second layer of anticipatory signals has to do with the quotation of two texts, both accredited to Isaiah, likely because he emerged as the prophetic umbrella for messianic hope. Both of these texts contain the same key word, *hodos*/way, a key motif for Mark later on in framing the journey narrative, 8: 27-10:52. The first quote comes from Exod. 23:20 and Mal. 3:1 and evokes the promise of God preparing the way, historically and prophetically. The second comes from Isa. 40:3 and carries with it the freight of God's miracle of bringing Israel home after exile. These texts attest to God's acts in the past and imply that the God who did these acts is now acting again in sending the Messiah forth into the world. God is sending a messenger to announce the Messiah's coming, to prepare the way, to cry in the wilderness, and to make the crooked straight. A momentous event is in the offing. In Qumran the same text was used to articulate the reason why the community was in the wilderness—to prepare for and thus herald the near advent of the Messiah.

Then in verses 4-8 the third layer of anticipatory signals appear in the figure of John the Baptist, in the role and tradition of Elijah redivivus. As the end of Malachi put it, the Elijah figure will appear before the great day comes. He will turn the hearts of fathers to children and vice versa. The metaphor is one of a call to repentance that emerges as the core of John's preaching and baptism. It is a call for all to repent, be baptized, and have sins forgiven. For this is the dawn of the new era. John points ahead to the coming One, who will baptize with the Spirit and with fire, to recreate and make new the old. John himself is only the voice crying in the wilderness. He points to the coming Messiah.

Here is the advent punch. The gospel, the scripture, and John toll loudly the messianic bell. It is the time for God's salvation clock to strike 12. Be joyful, repent, and get ready for the big gala event. It is here.

Willard M. Swartley

### **Third Sunday of Advent**

#### **Psalm 126**

This psalm can be divided into three parts. The first part, verses 1-3 speak of the restoration of Zion. The second stanza, verses 4 and 5 are a petition addressed to God. Note the imperative, restore, and the direct address O Lord. The petition echoes the beginning of the psalm, When the Lord restored. The final part, verse 6, expresses a strong sense of confidence and trust. In Hebrew the infinitive is used alongside the conjugated verb indicating emphasis. This is sometimes expressed in English by adding surely. Surely whoever will go out weeping...surely he will return rejoicing.

The movement of this psalm is the same as in Psalm 85. There is a remembrance of past salvation, then a plea for present deliverance, and finally a strong expression of confidence and trust. This chronology echoes our experience. We live in the present, a present which often seems contrary to God's grace and salvation. We remember the past, in which God's salvation was manifested, and whose reality we confess even if not experienced. We hope to experience a future in which God's kingdom will come, when God's order will reign. We live in tension with a pleasant past and a golden future.

This psalm is one of the psalms of ascent, a pilgrim's psalm. On the way, the pilgrim would recall with joy the past glories of God's help. On the way, the pilgrim would anticipate a restored future, a future restored according to God's will. But on the way, the pilgrim would look around and note the barren landscape. The dry wadis, so prevalent in Palestine, would remind her of the constant need for new water, for renewal, so that fertility, growth, may once more come. Like the dry stream beds whose flow is seasonal and sporadic, the pilgrim lives by experience the flow of God's grace into her life. Like the dry watercourses, sometimes God's grace seems far off and we must petition God to once again renew us. This is a frequent refrain on the lips of the pilgrim.

We might think that planting time and harvest time are both joyous occasions. The former filled with anticipation, the latter with fulfilled expectation. But indeed, often seed is sown with great concern about the future. Will it germinate, will it produce enough to carry us through the long winter, will it be safe from natural disasters? This psalm points us to a bold confidence about the future. Even though in the present one might despair, and weep even while sowing, in the future there will be a harvest, there will be joy.

It has been observed that the dominant attitude of people in our society is one of disappointment-disappointment with family, relationships, career, self-realization, and the life of the spirit. While our psalmist is disappointed with the present and longs for restoration, yet there is the expression of hope and confidence rather than despair. Perhaps we have lost confidence in a God who cares.

Perry B. Yoder

### **Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11**

We may be familiar with Isaiah 61 from Jesus' quotation of it in his first sermon, according to Luke 4:18-19; Jesus adds one line from Isa 58:6 "to let the oppressed go free." That addition fits well the theme of Isa 61:1-11, which proclaims liberation for the oppressed.

The one sent by the Lord to make this proclamation is not identified, but claims to have the spirit of the Lord and to have been anointed and sent by God to announce good news (61:1). Earlier in Isaiah it is the Lord's servant—the "suffering servant"—who has the spirit of the Lord and whom God sends (42:1, 19), and it is Zion/Jerusalem who is commissioned to announce good news (40:9-10; see Comments on Isa 40:1-11). Here, in Isa 61:1-4, these features are combined in one figure, who has good news for the oppressed, the brokenhearted, the captives, the prisoners (v. 1), and for Zion's mourners—those who mourn Zion (v. 3; contrast NRSV and see Isa 66:10). The content of that good news amounts to a dramatic reversal of present circumstances, as adumbrated in 61:3: a garland instead of ashes, oil of gladness instead of mourning, a mantle or coat of praise instead of a faint spirit. This reversal of fortunes is at God's initiative: it is the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of God's vengeance (61:2). It is, in other words, the imposition of God's rule and reign, which sets things right that are wrong. The advent of God's reign combines favor and vengeance, because it is the advent of justice; this is stated expressly in 61:8, where God speaks for the first time.

The one who speaks in Isa 61:1-4 (and through v. 7) is empowered, commissioned, and sent by God to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners. In the ancient world, only a king would be empowered and authorized to issue such a declaration. The voice in these verses speaks with royal authority and assumes royal prerogatives; those who followed Jesus recognized the same in him (Luke 19:38).

In the last two verses of Isaiah 61, the imagery is nuptial—the speaker assumes the character of a bride whose husband is God. Psalm 45 provides terms for comparison, and that Psalm is about a royal wedding. Elsewhere in Isaiah, God is the husband of Zion/Jerusalem (54:5; 62:1-5). In Isa 61:10-11, Zion/Jerusalem speaks, and speaks as one thought to be divorced from God (50:1) and abandoned (62:3-4), but who is in fact clothed with the celebrative garments of a wedding (61:10).

All of Isaiah 61 is part of larger text, extending from 60:1 through 62:12. This larger text is in the form of a liturgy, which begins with the announcement (a call to worship), addressed to Zion, that her light—God's light—has dawned in the darkness. It concludes, in 62:10-12, with a benediction and a charge to the people, who are to go out and prepare the way, since Zion's salvation, and her savior, has come. It is an advent liturgy.

Isaiah's description of Zion/Jerusalem—the desecrated, abandoned, ruined city—as God's bride is daring. But remember that the New Testament refers to Jerusalem as "our mother" (Gal 4:26). In Isa 61:10-11—and also in vv. 1-4?—"our mother" speaks; and she preaches an advent sermon. Those who have mourned over Zion will find in her their consolation.

Ben C. Ollenburger

### **1 Thessalonians 5:16-24**

First Thessalonians 5:16-22 contains eight brief admonitions concerning worship, prayer, and the exercise of the gifts of the Spirit in the life of the congregation. Verses 23 and 24 articulate a wish-prayer and a reminder of the faithfulness of God. Why might one choose to preach an Advent sermon on this passage?

Paul's first pastoral letter to the church at Thessalonica exhibits a pervasive mood of expectation: God will yet bring the salvation initiative in Christ to triumphant completion. The story which begins in Nazareth and Bethlehem and climaxes at the cross and tomb of Golgatha will be brought to a glorious conclusion. This narrative which encompasses both Christmas and Easter still envisions a rousing sequel, which the church awaits with joy and hope. In 1 Thess. 1:9-10 Paul rehearses the dramatic story of how the church at Thessalonica emerged: You

turned to God from idols, to serve a living and true God, and to wait for his Son from heaven, whom he raised from the dead. Their past, present, and future experience with God demonstrates the confidence that God has already acted to include these believers into the faith community and that God will yet restore and deliver them in the future.

This aura of advent also permeates the concluding admonitions in 5:16-24. The church is a community which both worships and serves while it awaits the coming of the triumphant Lord. Worship, especially during the season of advent, needs to be characterized by this eager expectation of the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ (vs. 23). However, this is not an escapist "pie in the sky by and by" kind of longing for future release. In the meantime, the church also serves God. These closing reminders follow Paul's counsel concerning attitudes and behavior toward the needy and obnoxious within the church (5:14) and his radical call for the Thessalonians to love even their enemies (5:15). Spiritual resources are available to the Christian community both for the exercise of patience within the church and for striving for good on behalf of their neighbors and even their enemies.

Paul's closing pastoral words to the community may be viewed under three points:

- The call to worship: Living between the times (with God's reign already glimpsed but not yet fully realized), the church is summoned to rejoice, pray, and give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for the church as made known in Christ Jesus (5:16-18). Note that Paul does not say, Give thanks for all circumstances.
- Guidelines for listening to the prophets: The Spirit of God needs freedom to work within the gathered community, especially through the ministry of prophecy, which edifies and strengthens the church (5:19-20). However, along with the exercise of spiritual gifts there need to be some checks and balances, namely testing and discerning whether the prophecy builds up the church (5:21-22).
- The benediction: The God whom we worship, whose word the church seeks to hear through its preachers, is ultimately a God of peace who desires that the church as a corporate body and individual believers might be preserved and sustained until the coming of the Lord. The guarantor of the whole enterprise is God! Ultimately the living and true God enables believers to cope with their circumstances. God is the faithful one whose activity on behalf of believers guarantees their wholeness.

Jacob W. Elias

### **Luke 1:39-55**

Advent 4 is commonly known as Mary's Sunday, although Elizabeth also figures largely in the reading from Luke. It is the interdependence between the two women, one older one younger, that results in the exuberant outpouring of confidence and praise of God we find in this passage.

#### *39-45 Elizabeth's blessing*

Mary makes a journey into the hill country to visit Elizabeth, her kinswoman. Her solitary journey from Nazareth up into the mountains of Judea in the early stages of pregnancy would have required a sturdy person, a person with considerable stamina and endurance. In all likelihood we should "repaint" the images of Mary that we carry around inside our heads to include definite muscles and the roughened hands and chapped lips of outdoor life.

When the two pregnant women meet, there is a delightfully feminine holy moment. The baby in Elizabeth's womb leaps in response to Mary's greeting. At that moment, Elizabeth too is filled with the Holy Spirit. She blesses Mary, she blesses the "fruit" of Mary's womb and she blesses "the one who believed that there will be a fulfillment of what has been spoken to her from the Lord." The future tense in Elizabeth's blessing is important because it makes clear that Mary's expectation of the fulfillment is more than just the pregnancy. The future tense points to the whole of Gabriel's message. That message is not only that she would bear a son but that this son will be great, he will be called the Son of the Most High and he will reign over the house of

Jacob. It is clear that both Mary and Elizabeth are thinking nationally as well as personally during this period of waiting on God and nature.

#### *46-56 Mary's prophecy*

Mary's prophetic song, known as the Magnificat from the first word of the Latin version, is structured in two parts. The first stanza (verses 46-49) is intensely personal and expressive of Mary's private joy. There are five personal pronouns in this section--my soul, my spirit, my savior, all generations will call me blessed, the powerful one has done great things for me. Mary's emphasis in this beginning part is on what God has done for her.

But what is most remarkable is that Mary chooses to interpret what God has done for her not as a dilemma, which it surely must also have been, but as a blessing. Even today, explaining an unexpected and unaccounted for pregnancy is a dilemma. But how much more so in an age when women were commonly regarded as the property of men. There were serious social and perhaps even life threatening consequences for women caught in this situation. In subsequent history, it has been clear that Mary's pregnancy was a gift of God. But there was no way for those closest to her to be so sure at the time. Surely this pregnancy must have had its awkward, difficult and even dangerous moments. Yet here, in the safety and privacy of Elizabeth's home, Mary assesses her situation as a blessing and an act of mercy on the part of the Lord, God her Savior.

On the one hand, it is of course completely anachronistic to declare Mary a feminist. On the other hand there is no better illustration of the modern feminist insight that the "personal is political" than Mary's second stanza. In verses 50-55, Mary shifts from the first person to the third person. In this part of the song, she makes the connection between her private joy and the blessing of God's people. She exults in the leveling that is a result of God's action--the rising of the humble and the falling of the mighty; the filling of the hungry, the emptying of the rich. In the miracle of her baby, in her own private joy Mary perceives the blessing of justice for the people of God. It is precisely God's action on behalf of those of "low estate" or "low degree" that is perceived as "mercy," a word which appears twice, once at the beginning of the second stanza and again toward the end. God's mercy is on "those who fear him" (50) and God has helped Israel "in remembrance of his mercy" (54).

In the first stanza the action moves between one person (Mary) and God. It's a two-way connection. What changes in the second section and makes it so politically radical is that the two-way connection becomes a three-way connection. The power of God acts to empower the lowly and to disempower the exalted ones. This triangular tension, as Robert Tannehill notes, first expressed in Mary's song, foreshadows a theme that will be important in the rest of the gospel as well. Luke stands squarely within Israel's prophetic tradition. The good news is a word of comfort to many and a word of anger to some. Or as Maynard-Reid puts it, a word of hope to many and a word of challenge to some.

Mary H. Schertz

#### **John 1:6-8; 19-28**

These texts put John the Baptist and Jesus in proper relationship. The role of John the Baptist is narratively exploited to extol the person and role of Jesus, the One to come. John's function is pointer and witness to Jesus.

In the first verses, 6-8, the One coming is the Light, One who drives away the darkness of the world so that the darkness will now and forevermore not overcome the Light. John is not the Light, but he is a witness sent by God to announce that the Light is coming into the world. And this is the One whom all are called to believe in so that, as the Gospel later says many times, that all might have life through him.

The second text, vv. 19-28, explains further the role of John. These verses are a structural guide to the rest of chapter 1. The Baptist's witness to Jesus culminates in v. 29 where Jesus is announced by John to be the Lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world. Then, in the

next segment, 1:35- 51, the first disciples bear testimony to Jesus as the Christ, Son of God, King of Israel, the Son of Man (Humanity).

John's role is to frame the entrance of Jesus into the narrative and into the world as the Christ. The evangelist wants to make crystal clear that it is Jesus and not John who is the Messiah. So in these verses, Priests and Levites, sent by the Pharisees, to John in the wilderness stage the inquiry sessions. "Who are you?" The narrator puts before us the gamut of eschatological figures: The Christ, Elijah, the prophet—in descending order of endtime importance. But John the Baptist is none of these. Thus, the distinction between John and the Christ is made emphatic. No, I am not the Christ. Some people at the time of John's Gospel might have believed otherwise, that John himself was the messianic fulfillment. We know from later sources that some people followed John the Baptist as Messiah even into the 2d to 4th centuries. The Mandaeans (6-7th cent.) believed that John was not only the prophet, Elijah redivivus, but also the Christ. John's Gospel makes it unmistakably clear that this is not the case.

Here as in Mark, John is the voice crying in the wilderness. This figure had not emerged in eschatological hope as a definitive persona in the drama of messianic fulfillment. Hence John's role continued required further explanation. John baptizes with water, but the One coming is of such messianic importance that he does not consider himself worthy to untie his sandal throngs. This raises the expectations of the crowds that had come out into wilderness area beyond Jordan. One is about to come who far exceeds the role of John the Baptist. This One coming into the world as the light, life, and love-giver will be the Savior of the world. He will dispel the darkness, and make the light shine brightly as the noonday sun.

Praise the God of salvation. The Light is coming into our world, our congregations, our hearts and homes in this Christmas season. Let us welcome the Light, and like John the Baptist, bear faithful witness. The light has come. If you have access to John Michael Talbot's great piece, *Light Eternal*, listen to the first parts of it before you preach your sermon.

Willard M. Swartley

## **Fourth Sunday of Advent**

### **Psalm 89:1-4; 19-26**

This is a lengthy psalm, 52 verses long, and a composite one. It begins with a hymn of praise to God which runs up to verse 19. It then shifts to a recounting of God's promise to David and to the davidic dynasty. In verse 38, however, the psalm turns into a lament. It accuses God, in light of present realities, of having broken covenant with David and consequently with Israel as well (notice verse 39, for example). In verses 46 and following we have the petition part of the lament. The final verse, verse 52, is not an organic part of the psalm, but is the refrain used to end one of the books in the Psalms (look at the end of Psalm 72 for example).

The selected portion of this psalm is troubling. It is taken in part from the hymn of praise, verses 1-4, and partly from the promise to David, verses 19-26. What is missing entirely is the lament, which is the point of the psalm. The hymn and the promise to David set the stage, they are background, for the complaint and petition of the lament.

In general, the psalms are domesticated by omitting the laments. Evidently, we are not supposed to be unhappy with God. It is not appropriate to confront God with what appears to us to be a breach of contract. We are not supposed to be miserable and give voice to our misery. In short, we have disallowed, and perhaps made irrelevant, some of our strongest emotions.

Perhaps we cannot use the laments because we do not have the courage and faith of the psalmist! Which shows greater faith and trust in God—to confront God with what troubles us, with what seems unfair and unjust, with what seems contrary to the will and promises of God, or to try to hide these thoughts and to bury them as unsuitable for God's hearing? Do we not confront God because we believe it won't make any difference? Or perhaps, we believe that we

do not count for enough, in God's estimate, that we can argue with God? The laments are born of a robust faith and a strong sense of self worth.

If we do not allow the rosy parts of Scripture to confront the contradictory realities of life, are we not making faith irrelevant to our existence? If faith is only safe within the hallowed walls of the sanctuary, if it cannot be challenged by our experiences, then is not the dialogue between faith and life diminished or even abolished? What results may be the monologue of a recited faith which does not address its audience.

We, as Christians, can relativize these royal passages by interpreting them christologically and eschatologically. In this way the lack of congruence between promise and reality is solved. But if God's previous covenants and promises are no longer valid in history, why do we believe God's latter covenant and promises, those of the New Testament, are any more valid? Can we be sure that God only breaks Old Testament covenants? That while God may have misled David and Israel about the permanence of the Davidic dynasty, God will not mislead us? Perhaps these are not easy questions to answer, but they should warn us to take seriously the historical realities out of which this lament grew. They should also encourage us to do more lamenting about the gap which exists between the kingdom of God and its promises and reality as we experience it.

Perry B. Yoder

## **2 Samuel 7:1-11, 16**

We moderns tend to be suspicious of monarchies and dynasties, and the Bible lends support to our suspicions (Deut 17:14-20). Yet, if somewhat grudgingly, God accedes to the wishes of Israel and chooses a king for them (1 Sam 7 - 12), and in our text God establishes a dynasty—the Davidic dynasty. 2 Samuel 7 has two units; in vv. 1-17 God replies to David's desire to build a temple for the ark, the symbol of God's presence; in the remainder of the chapter David offers a prayer of thanksgiving for what God has told him. David gives thanks even though God has denied his request, with which the chapter begins.

2 Sam 7:1-17 is a single unit with two parts: (I) in vv. 1-3, David reports to the prophet Nathan his desire to build a temple, and Nathan, speaking for God, approves; (II) in vv. 4-17, God instructs Nathan to tell David differently. In the ancient world, only kings built temples, and then only after receiving permission from the deity; hence, David consults the prophet before embarking on his project. The first part of God's reply, via Nathan, (a) in vv. 4-7, is negative: David will not build a temple. The second part, (b) in vv. 8-17, is positive. Here God makes a pun on the word "house." No, God says, David will not build me a house (a temple, v. 8), but I promise to build him a house (a dynasty, v. 11). So is born the house of David.

God's promise to David includes the promise of peace and security for Israel, whose king David is and whose kings his sons—his descendants—will be in perpetuity (vv. 10-11, 16). Here again God makes a pun: David's son will be God's son, and God will be a father to him. And this relationship, along with David's throne, will last forever (v. 14).

In 2 Samuel 7, David is denied what he wanted, and is granted something extraordinary for which he did not ask. He intended to do something for God, but instead God made a unilateral and irrevocable promise to him. At least three things are remarkable about this. First, the immediate benefactor of God promise was Solomon, David's son (and God's) conceived in a murderous adultery with Bathsheba. Second, David's throne, and the succession of Davidic kings, met a devastating end in the year 586 BC, when Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, thus calling into question the integrity of God's word. Psalm 89, which is also a text for the fourth Sunday of advent, repeats in poetic form the unilateral and irrevocable promises of 2 Samuel 7, and pointedly asks God how it is that these promises, made on God's own initiative, have been broken. Third, the New Testament identifies none other than Jesus as the heir of these promises; indeed, the very first verse of the New Testament does so (Matt 1:1). So does the Gospel lection for Advent's fourth Sunday, Luke 1:32. Moreover, the New Testament identifies Jesus as "the

Son” of whom God promises to be the father in 2 Sam 7:16, Ps 2:7; 89:26-27 (cf. Acts 13:33). John 1:49 makes the implication clear: “Rabbi, you are the Son of God; you are the King of Israel.”

God’s promises to David, which seemed to shatter on the shoals of history, are revived and given new vigor in the New Testament, where they are radically reinterpreted. Jesus, whom Luke identifies with the “house of David” through Joseph (Lk 1:27), perpetuates no monarchy and no dynasty, but is who he is—God’s royal son—in express relation to what God said and promised long ago. It is in this light that the birth of Jesus, in a manger, is the advent of God, and of God’s kingdom.

Ben C. Ollenburger

### **Romans 16: 25-27**

A doxology (Rom. 16:25-27) brings Paul’s epistle to the Roman house churches to a close. On the Sunday before Christmas most preachers and congregations may hesitate to give serious attention to the profound and lofty rhetoric of this major letter, but surely an ascription of praise to God would be suitable as the basis for a meditation on the last Advent Sunday!

This doxology appears after Rom. 14:23 in some manuscripts, after 15:33 in others, and after 16:24 in other ancient manuscripts. Some commentators suggest that Paul’s original letter did not have these verses, but they became incorporated as part of the letter in the course of the repeated congregational reading of Romans in the context of worship. Whether these words were written by Paul, or whether they represent the development of the liturgical tradition of the later church, this doxology summarizes many of the major themes of Romans. And, since the major theme of the epistle to the Romans is the gospel as God’s power for salvation to everyone who believes (1:16-17), a homily based on this doxology can inspire and instruct believers during their advent celebration of God’s gift of salvation in Jesus Christ.

Romans 16:25-27 communicates the past, the present, and the intended outcome of the gospel which was unveiled in Jesus Christ and preached by the apostles. What we anticipate during Advent and celebrate at Christmas encompasses past, present, and future:

- The past: The doxology alludes to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages (16:25). “Mystery” refers not to a riddle or puzzle to be solved through research and investigation but to the divinely intended salvation purpose unveiled or made known by God in and through the birth, life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As Paul has indicated in the main argument of the letter (3:21-22), and as conveyed through repeated use of certain Old Testament readings during the season of Advent, this revelation is made known through the prophetic writings (16:26).
- The present: For Paul and the church, the now of God’s self-disclosure in Jesus Christ (cf. 3:21) signals the new epoch: the mystery that was kept secret for long ages ... is now disclosed and through the prophetic writings is made known to all nations (16:25-26). This is the watershed event which characterizes the present as the era of God’s grace.
- The intended outcome: The doxology echoes Paul’s opening self-introduction in declaring the goal of the proclamation of the gospel of Jesus Christ to all the nations: to bring about the obedience of faith (16:26; cf. 1:5). God’s saving purpose encompasses all peoples! This is the climactic emphasis of the concluding exhortation in Rom. 15:8,9: Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. This is also the message of the angels to the shepherds: good news of great joy for all the people (Luke 2:10). During Advent the church is invited to ponder the fact that the one and only God desires salvation for all. To God be the glory for ever. Amen.

Jacob W. Elias

### **Luke 1:26-38, 46-55**

These two texts are the annunciation scene between Gabriel and Mary (1:26-38) and then Mary's song, often called "The Magnificat" in 1:46-55. They not only play an important role in the story of Jesus' birth, they tell us a lot about the role Jesus would later play in the life of God's people.

Along with other texts in Luke's birth narratives, they are programmatic for the gospel. They set up themes and motifs that will be important later in the gospel.

The heart of the first text, the annunciation narrative, is the dialogue between Gabriel and Mary. This dialogue happens in three scenes. The first is the angel's greeting to Mary and her response of confusion and uncertainty. The second is the annunciation itself; Gabriel tells of the baby's birth, that he will be named Jesus and that he will great, the Son of the Most High and the heir to David's throne. To this announcement about what will happen, Mary responds with continued uncertainty about how it will happen since she has no husband. The third scene is the angel's explanation of how these events will happen, through the power of the Holy Spirit. Gabriel then adds that Elizabeth has also conceived a son. Mary's response to this assurance and explanation is acceptance and consent to the new turn her life is taking.

Initial confusion and uncertainty in the face of an epiphany is normal in the biblical text and normal in human experience. God's visitation catches us, as Mary, in the midst of ordinary, common life and has the potential to turn our selves and our lives in new directions. Naturally, our first responses are apt to be uncertainty and confusion. But in this epiphany, the love of God is the foundation of what is being required of Mary—the first words Gabriel speaks to her are words of assurance and love. By the end of the encounter Mary is able to perceive this new direction from the perspective of trust in God's love. She accepts and consents to the annunciation.

Following her momentous encounter with God's messenger, Mary makes a journey into the hill country to visit Elizabeth. The song known as the Magnificat is the song that Mary sings when the two women meet for the first time after God has acted in their lives in these wondrous ways. Elizabeth's baby leaps in her womb and Mary breaks into song.

It is a remarkable song. It is structured in two parts. The first stanza (verses 46-49) of the song expresses Mary's private joy. It is written in the first person. Mary's emphasis is on what God has done for her. Notice that in this section Mary interprets what God has done for her as a blessing rather than as a dilemma—which it must also have been. Explaining an unexpected pregnancy as a gift of God surely had its awkward moments and surely demanded a great deal of courage from Mary.

The second stanza, verses 50-55, is written in the third person. In this part of the song, Mary makes the connection between her private joy and the blessing of God's people. In this stanza she moves from commenting on her own good fortune to commenting on the good fortune of God's people. She exults in the leveling that is a result of God's action—the rising of the humble and the falling of the mighty; the filling of the hungry, the emptying of the rich. In the miracle of her baby, in her own private joy Mary perceives the blessing of justice for the people of God.

Salvation, as it is presented in the beginning chapters of Luke, has two distinct dimensions. One component is the forgiveness of sins (1:77), but the aspect of salvation to which Mary calls our attention is the justice of God.

Mary H. Schertz

## **Christmas**

### **Psalm 148**

Psalm 148 is a fantastic psalm of praise. Everything that is, is summoned to praise God. The psalm divides into two parts (1-6, 7-17). In the first part we find the inhabitants of the spheres called to praise God. In the second part, those on the earth are commanded to join in. The recurring refrain, "Let them praise the name of the LORD" is found in verse 5 and 13. Following the refrain, the reasons for praise are given. After verse 5 the reasons that the inhabitants of the

heavenly realm praise God is because God created them, made them everlasting, and provided an order for them.

On the earth all nature and life are to praise God because of God's uniqueness – God's fame, splendor, and care for Israel. Up to verse 14 the poem has stressed the universal and the general by the use of a poetic device called 'merismus,' in which the poet names two opposites as a way of including the whole. For example in verse 10 we find wild beasts and tame beasts, flying things and creeping things. In verse 12 we have young men and young women, old people and young people. These pairs are a poetic way of saying these things mentioned and everything that falls in between them.

However, in verse 14 the psalm gets specific. God is to be praised because of God's care for the faithful, for Israel, the people close to God. This twist from the absolute universal to the historically particular catches the problem and miracle of the incarnation. How can the God of all the earth, the God of all creatures, the God of all humankind, be the God of a particular people? Why should all things and beings praise God for what God has done for a specific people?

At this advent season we celebrate the particular, the birth of a single individual in a historically unique time. Yet we believe that this particular event has universal significance. But the universality of this event should not blind us to the universality of God both before and after Jesus' birth. All are called to praise God in the hymn, whether they are part of God's people or not. In Jesus' birth we find a new reason why all humanity should praise God.

Unfortunately, sometimes people want to take the particular and keep it particular. They want exclusion rather than inclusion. They praise God for what God has done for them, not believing that God is worthy of praise by all.

This powerful hymn has had an influential history. The hymn used by the three Hebrew boys before being cast into the furnace was modeled on our psalm (this psalm is found in the Apocrypha). It also served as a model for St Francis' "Canticle to the Sun," which in turn led to the hymn "All Creatures of our God and King."

Perry Yoder

## Epiphany

### Isaiah 60:1-6

Before moving into commentary on the passages for Epiphany, it is worth reviewing the various theological strands woven around this day (January 6). Epiphany (which means appearing or manifestation) was being celebrated by Christians early in the third century. It predates the Western Church's Christmas date by about a century. Three events narrated in the gospels (the coming of the wise men, Jesus' baptism, and the wedding at Cana) were associated with this celebration. Through these accounts Christians saw evidence of God's manifestation in Jesus. Other lectionary texts eventually were added to these key accounts. Both the Isaiah and Psalm 72 readings end at somewhat odd places when taken at the level of the text. However, when Epiphany is used as an interpretive key, the choice of verses makes more sense: Jesus, the Redeeming Messiah prefigured in these texts, has come and God is revealed through him.

Isaiah 60-62 forms a unit within the final section of Isaiah (chapters 56-66). They triumphantly describe the restoration of Zion through God's intervention. Chapter 60 opens with quite a different tone from the one heard in Chapter 59; it is a rhapsody of promise and fulfillment. Verse 1 summons Zion to wake up and greet God's glory rising on her like the sun. Though there is darkness like nightfall surrounding this city on a hill, God's light is bringing a new day to the place that had been God's habitation in earlier times. It is significant to notice that God's light is dawning on the city ("your" here is a feminine possessive agreeing in gender with city or Zion), one filled with inhabitants of course, but whose citizens are secondary in importance at the beginning of this chapter. God's glory is making Zion holy ground. The

brilliance of the light will draw other nations and kings to witness the radiant glory surrounding the city.

Verses 4-6 describe the ingathering of people returning or being drawn to Zion. Sons and daughters who have religious or familial connections to the city are coming home. Some people bring offerings from the sea (whether this is restricted to the actual fruits of sea life or extends to goods brought by ship [see verse 9] is unclear). Other people bring goods from as far away as Sheba (today's Yemen) in such abundance that the city is covered with their gift-toting camels. Their gifts to the city of glory signify their praise of God. Verse 7 continues the theme of offering, specifically rams that would be acceptable on the altar of God's dwelling place. (The omission of this verse in the suggested reading makes sense if one bears in mind the Christocentric nature of Epiphany and the Christian belief that Christ has fulfilled the requirement for sacrifice.) These verses picture an abundance of people and gifts flowing into Zion, not because the inhabitants of Zion deserve this outpouring (see the preceding chapters if this is in doubt) or because the city in and of itself is such a wonderful place. This abundance comes to Zion because God's glory has transformed it; people are come to her bringing great wealth as a response to God's luminous presence.

Several interesting translation differences show up between the NIV and NRSV in this passage. The NRSV uses the future verb tense (shall) in all cases except verse 1a and 4a where the present tense is used in the imperative mood. The text leaves the sense that God's new day is a present reality but as a morning that breaks leisurely. The NIV uses the present tense in verses 1, 2, 4 and the future tense (will) in the remaining verses. This rendering is more emphatic with a greater sense of urgency and confidence. It is almost breathless in exuberance.

The word "Zion" has become layered with meanings over the generations. The origins of the words are not certain, but it appears to have identified a particular geological feature in the terrain. Later it identified 1) a fortification on the crest of a hill, 2) the area also known as the City of David which eventually included the temple area where the ark of the covenant was set, 3) Jerusalem and thus considered a religious and political center, 4) the people of Jerusalem as a collective group, and 5) the heavenly Jerusalem. (See the Interpreter's Bible Dictionary for more information.) It may be hard for contemporary Christians to hear more discrete aspects of this word in the text through these cumulated meanings. When reading English translations it's easy to think that God's glory is dawning primarily on the people, especially if one reads directly from chapter 59 into chapter 60. The context of the entire chapter makes it clear that God light has come first to the city.

These verses (along with the rest of chapter 60) reveal a picture of Zion that is nearly contradicted by the sad state of current affairs in Jerusalem. The glory of God seems hidden behind the clouds of distrust, belligerence, and violence. Central to the announcement of chapter 60 is that God has acted on the city despite the actions of her people. Zion's new day is God's gift and the fulfillment of a promise. It was not arranged by political negotiations or diplomatic maneuverings. Perhaps our prayers for peace in Jerusalem miss the mark. Perhaps we should pray for God's light to manifest itself in Jerusalem as promised in Chapter 60 so peoples whose religious home is Zion and those from other nations and faiths will be drawn to the radiant glory of God. And should we be courageous enough to pray for God's new dawning, may we be attentive and trusting enough to perceive it.

Rebecca Slough

### **Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14**

The psalms appointed for each Sunday's lectionary readings are intended to pick up or extend themes heard in the Old Testament reading. In Isaiah 60 God reestablishes the peace and righteousness of Zion; this psalm describes the nature of its just and righteous ruler. Reading all verses from 1 to 14 would be fine. Given the overall intent of the psalm and its connection with Isaiah 60 for Epiphany, it would be fitting to include verses 18-19 when reading the text for worship. .

Psalm 72 is considered by many scholars to be in the category of royal psalms, which have Israel's king as the central topic. This psalm is believed to have been composed before the exile. Along with the other so-called royal psalms (Ps 2, 89, 110) it makes clear the relationship between God as the universal sovereign and the early king. It is no surprise that early Christians saw in Psalm 72 a prefiguration of Jesus. "Joy to the world" is Isaac Watts' hymn based on it.

The sections of the psalm appointed in the lectionary listing petitions God to grant the king the gifts of justice and righteousness so that he may govern rightly. Verses 2, 4, 12-14 emphasize the king's administrative authority for redressing the needs of the poor and oppressed people of Israel. Verses 8-11 pray for the king's dominion to extend beyond the boundaries of Israel. The just and righteous rule of the king affects the natural world making the mountains and hills prosper for the good of all people (verses 3, 6-7).

The NRSV uses "May he..." throughout verses 1-11 shifting to the present tense in verses 12-14 where declarations of the king's righteous acts are made. This suggests that the king delivers, pities, saves, and redeems those in need now. Because of this current action, the fulfillment of their prior petitions can be grounded in the hope. The NIV uses the future "He will..." in verses 1-14 implying that the king will fulfill these righteous acts as a result of God's gifts of justice and righteousness. In footnotes each translation indicates the validity of the other's rendering.

The NRSV opens the psalm with the petition "Give the king your justice, O God." The NIV opens with "Endow the king with your justice, O God." Other translations equally use "give" and "endow." The subtle difference in the word choice is interesting. Giving the king justice and righteousness can suggest that these qualities for governing are handed over or offered as one might hand over a crown or scepter. They are significant "tools" of authority and power. While the idea of God "giving" the king justice and righteousness does not preclude the possibility that the king's character can be transformed, this is not an obvious meaning for the word. To endow the king with justice and righteousness implies that these gifts are taken into the fabric of the king's character becoming a part of his way of governing. Acting justly and righteously is integral to the king's way of being.

The social picture presented in this psalm demonstrates the interconnected relationships between God and the king, the king and his people, the king's rule and the natural world. When these various sets of relationships are aligned properly, peace and prosperity are by-products of justice. And when peace and prosperity prevail, the nations are blessed through the king (vs. 17b).

Righteousness in Old Testament understanding is more specific and less legalistic than most of our current notions of the word. To act righteously was to fulfill obligations within one's social network of relationships, that is, to act rightly toward those people to whom one is accountable. While these obligations may be in keeping with laws governing human interactions, they are not limited to matters of law. For the king to act righteously, he was to use his power and authority to "make right" relationships within his domain. There may have been clear legal reasons for why poor and needy people lived in the realm. But such legalities did not exempt the king from righteous action that would reinstate the well being of people suffering as a result of poverty or violence. The righteous and just king is not simply a manager of the various affairs of state, setting policy and maintaining law and order. He actually could disrupt legal systems and processes to restore to full humanity those people in his domain whose relationships had been distorted by the powerful. Their blood is precious in his sight. (See Interpreter's Bible Dictionary for more information.)

The king of the psalm is called to exercise God's gifts of righteousness and justice for the sake of his people. They pray for God to give or endow him with "your justice ... your righteousness." These are not gifts of the king's making; not attributes of his own creation. The psalm does not suggest that the king should govern righteously and justly so he can "cover his bases," "save his own skin," or "bolster his approval rating." The king's continuing reign, with

all its rights and responsibilities, is not the end to which righteousness and justice are exercised. These powerful gifts are for saving and redeeming the “little people” of Israel.

The messianic qualities of this psalm foreshadow Jesus as the ideal king, the supreme sovereign in whom justice and righteousness are perfected. But, the exuberance of the psalm might leave a hollow ring in the hearts of some worshipers, and not only because of the exclusive “king” imagery. This interpretation of the psalm opens a sticky theological question: why do suffering, racism, oppression, poverty, abuse and violence continue to plague human beings if the supremely just and righteous ruler, Jesus, has been revealed and reigns among us?

For Israel and for us this psalm remains a prayer of hope. The reign of Davidic kings fell short of the justice and righteousness for which the people fervently prayed. Leaders ever since have fallen short as well. The reality of peace and prosperity for which the psalm sings has yet to break fully into any place in the world. But the signs identifying their presence in our midst are seen in glimpses and shadows. Those among us blessed to see and believe these fleeting peeks at shalom continue to pray with anticipation.

Rebecca Slough

### **Matthew 2:1-12**

The gospel text for Epiphany, the church’s festival of light, is the familiar journey of the magi to worship the tiny King of the Jews in Jerusalem. This text, in Matthew 2:1-12, is also one of the most starkly political texts in the New Testament—a reality that often seems to get lost in the general slosh of sentimentality that marks North American Christmas celebrations.

Wise strangers from the East set Jerusalem afire with gossip when they start asking about a baby king they have sought by following the light of a star. The other king, the grownup one meanwhile on the throne in Jerusalem, has his ways of knowing what happens in his city. This news troubles him—not that he hasn’t heard these messianic expectations before—but the arrival of the wise ones and their inquiries make it a more immediate concern. His response to the possibility of a small rival in Bethlehem is to set in motion a treacherous plan to use the ardor of the sages for his own nefarious purposes. It is a plan that is thwarted by the sages, at least in its most immediate purpose. They heed the warning they receive in a dream, a warning surely supported by their own perceptions and misgivings, and return to their own country without informing Herod of the whereabouts of the child.

There are two things about this simple story that continue to take my breath away. One is the integrity to the light maintained by the sages. These are not peasants—the clues in the text indicate that they are people of power and wealth. They cause a stir when they come to Jerusalem. People notice them. They come to the attention of the king in ways that not everyone coming into Jerusalem does, no matter what they ask. They have treasures to open and lay before the baby when they find him. Yet, even though Herod sweeps them into his court, flatters them with his questions and his need of their help, they stay true to the purposes of God. They honor the light they have followed so long rather than succumbing to Herod’s attention—making their homeward journey a precarious one. They take courage in hand and disobey the reigning king to protect the baby king they came to honor.

The other is the sheer terror of the principalities and powers that is unleashed against the light that we celebrate on this Sunday. A boy child under two and some unruly sages completely upset the reigning monarch in Jerusalem. He is enraged. We cannot read the story of the wily magi and their protection of the infant Jesus without attending to the pain of the other families in Bethlehem who lost their baby boys to Herod’s rampage. It is a sobering account of how fragile the emotional balance of those in power is. The baby king of the Jews posed no real, political threat to Herod—then or later. His rage is completely out of proportion to the reality. But what havoc and sorrow the parents of Bethlehem suffered as a result of his paranoia.

And so the light shines—on through the centuries—at great cost. Epiphany is a time to recognize both the light and the darkness it illuminates.

### **Ephesians 3:1-12**

On the Sunday following Christmas congregations often focus on the Lukan narratives about Jesus' birth. On Epiphany Sunday the church normally turns to Matthew's story about the visit of the Magi from the distant east. When the stately visitors from the east show up with their gifts for the Christ child the message is clear. Jesus' birth receives notice and acclaim far beyond what would have been expected, given his humble origins as a baby born in a stable in Bethlehem to a teenage mom displaced by Caesar's decree. The birth of Jesus has implications not only for the people of Israel but also for all the peoples and nations of the world.

The epistolary text for Epiphany Sunday is Ephesians 3:1-13. This passage naturally presents itself for this occasion since it dwells on an expansive vision of the gospel as encompassing both Jews and Gentiles within the embrace of God's marvelous grace. In Ephesians 2 this inclusive portrait of God's embrace has already been painted in vivid strokes. Both members of *the commonwealth of Israel* and those who had formerly been *strangers to the covenants of promise* (c.f. 2:12) have now become *citizens with the saints* (2:19) and *members of the household of God* (2:20).

Ephesians 3:1 introduces Paul reflecting gratefully and with awe on this cosmic turn of events—including his role in announcing this revolutionary gospel. Paul is characterized as *a prisoner for Christ Jesus for the sake of the Gentiles* (3:1), an indication of his own special calling as apostle to the Gentiles to make the gospel known beyond his own Jewish people.

The word "epiphany" does not occur in this text. However, Paul's privileged preview of the gospel includes the theme of revelation, the unveiling of God's all-encompassing grace: ... *you have already heard of the commission of God's grace that was given me for you, and how the mystery was made known to me by revelation* (3:2,3). The word *mystery* appears three times within a few verses: Ephesians 3:3,4,9. God has now revealed what had been previously kept hidden from human view and comprehension. Imbedded within these reflections are some of the most exalted of all the claims concerning what God is about. The mystery of the inclusion of the Gentiles is elaborated in a sweeping portrayal of the salvation drama, in which the proclamation of the gospel has a strategic role: *In former generations this mystery was not made known to humankind, as it has now been revealed to his holy apostles and prophets by the Spirit: that is, the Gentiles have become fellow heirs, members of the same body, and sharers in the promise in Christ Jesus through the gospel.* (3:5-6)

After further reflections about Paul's role in bringing the gospel of Christ to the Gentiles (3:7-9) the grandiose intention of God (*who created all things*, 3:9) is articulated: ... *so that through the church the wisdom of God in its rich variety might now be made known to the rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.* (3:10) What the author describes as *the eternal purpose* being accomplished in *Christ Jesus our Lord* (3:11) obviously includes a strategic role for the church.

An Epiphany message on Ephesians 3 which weaves into it themes from Matthew's story of the visit of the Magi might well highlight the awe and mystery of God's still unfolding purpose, a purpose which includes the church and elicits both adoration and obedience. This purpose is

- Previously hidden within God's wise plan for the ages
- Now revealed in Jesus Christ through the gospel, through whom people of every tribe and people and nation can become fellow heirs of God's grace
- Glimpsed by the foreigners from the east, and clearly communicated by the prophets and the apostles, including the imprisoned apostle Paul
- Now made known through the church in an ongoing Epiphany of the inclusive Gospel, which addresses all peoples, including the rulers and the authorities!

Jacob W. Elias

