

# Bible Study: Advent 3 (B) – Dec. 13, 2020

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

In this passage from Third Isaiah, the exiles have returned from Babylon. Their task is to rebuild the city: to create a new Jerusalem. The theme is transformation. The messianic overtones and gospel message are unmistakable on this third Sunday of Advent as we rejoice in the expectation of God entering the world in human form to transform and save God's people. The anointed one heralds the coming of a new era: the Kingdom of God on earth, or in the words of St. Augustine of Hippo: "the city of God."

The encompassing gospel message of mission is announced: (1) to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; (2) to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; (3) to provide for those who mourn in Zion.

The prophet/poet describes the transforming work of the anointed one in vivid metaphor: to give the people of Zion a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. Take a few minutes with a pencil and paper, or drawing materials, to describe some concrete details as you imagine the new Jerusalem, the city of God.

- In a single verse, the prophet speaks of how God loves justice, and will make an everlasting covenant with the people of God. What are some of the elements of an ideal covenant, and how might they ensure justice? Is it the work of the city of God or of the earthly city to create such a covenant?

## **Psalms 126**

Through the technological advancements of our modern context, we possess the unparalleled potential to be connected to others, yet often—even with the plethora of social media platforms and hand-held internet devices available to us, we are more disconnected than ever. This is especially true in the United States, where the culture places a high value on self-sufficiency and rugged individualism. So, it is not surprising—when we read a passage of Scripture like this Psalm that speaks to

a corporate experience of sorrow, redemption, and joy—that we might find ourselves struggling to relate experientially. The Psalmist, however, challenges us to see ourselves as connected to others in the midst of our time of struggle and to seek out the restoration of God together in unity. Sorrow somehow becomes more bearable when shared with others. Likewise, the joy and celebration of overcoming become that much sweeter when shared.

- In your life, can you think of a time of great struggle that you finally overcame?
- Did you go through this time alone or was it shared with others?
- If it was shared with others, how did it change your experience?

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

“Love your enemy.” “If anyone strikes you on the right cheek, turn the other also.” Scripture is full of tall orders and this exhortation is no different. The preacher urges the audience to “rejoice always,” “pray without ceasing,” and to “give thanks in all circumstances.” Just one of these biddings would be difficult enough for any of us to accomplish, but to attempt to live out all three would be seemingly impossible! The early Christians, however, believed that the return of Jesus was imminent and because of this, they wanted to frame their daily tasks and responsibilities in a way that would ensure they would always be ready for his return. Perhaps our expectations are, understandably, tempered after two thousand years of waiting, yet I wonder how our lives would change if we framed our lives and daily practices with the expectation that Jesus might return today—whatever that might look like. In the meantime, let us, as the preacher reminds us, “hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.”

- How would practicing a life of prayer “without ceasing” change the way we experienced and interacted with others?
- If you knew Jesus would return tomorrow, how would it change your behaviors or your view of the world?

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

This passage from the Gospel of John recalls the passage in the first chapter of Luke when the infant John the Baptist recognized the infant Jesus in Mary’s womb, and leapt for joy. That same child is now the man sent from God to testify to the light. This passage also refers back to the words of the prophet Isaiah. John the Baptist, like Isaiah and Mary, is a servant-prophet, commissioned to “make straight the way of the Lord,” empowered to speak and act in ways that bring hope,

comfort and joy to the people of Israel. There is a theme of recognition and of Christ-among-us in this passage when John says, “Among you stands one whom you do not know.” Further, John says, “I baptize with water.” The one who comes after him, the one whose sandal he is not worthy to untie, will baptize with the Holy Spirit, the water of life, salvation.

- Think of a time when you have recognized – or failed to recognize – the spirit of God shining in a human being. Share your stories. What words can you use to describe the feeling of the encounter?
- Baptism is a form of anointing. What does it mean to you, that the Son of God was anointed by a human being, a man of humble means and demeanor? What is the connection between humility and the voice of one crying in the wilderness?
- Look at Isaiah 40:1–11, the passage that John refers to when he says, “I am a voice crying in the wilderness.” How does that passage deepen and enrich your understanding of the scene of John baptizing in Bethany?