

SCRIPTURES FOR SUNDAY 12.11.2016

THE THIRD SUNDAY OF ADVENT

Isaiah 35:1-10

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

¹The **wilderness** and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus ²it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the Lord, the majesty of our God. ³Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. ⁴Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you."

⁵Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; ⁶then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the **wilderness**, and streams in the desert; ⁷the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. ⁸A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. ⁹No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. ¹⁰And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

This chapter in the Book of Isaiah seems to be addressed to the Hebrew people who are captive, having been deported to their new forced home of exile in Babylon. The prophetic utterance, issued to them during the 7th century seems to be a picture of God's promise to bring them back to their home, to their land, to their vocation, albeit in the reverse way that they were exiled. Instead of crossing the wilderness into exile, they will return through it to the land of promise. Pretty, prophetic and poignant, it's easy to forget out subversive and radical this poetry of rich images would be spoken to a defeated people, with broken dreams, most likely damaged bodies from war and languishing in exile.

wilderness : in Hebrew the word is synonymous with desert. It has both the connotation of the wild place beyond human control, as well as the extremeness of the desert with its daily death-inducing heat and freezing nightly temperatures. It's a fearsome place of testing and trial for both physical survival as well as spiritual centeredness. Curiously here, the parched, dry land of testing becomes a lush land of realized promise, God's glory and joyous singing. There are parallels to this vision in Isaiah 41:18-19 and 51:3.

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened :: this paragraph contains a great many reversals of what is [at the time of the prophet]. Those with disabilities are made whole. It's a radical image of healing, and also of restoration for many such suffering inducing disabilities were caused in warfare. An example is that the Babylonians wounded, maimed and blinded King Zedekiah in their victory over him (2 kings 25:7). It's an image of healing and vindication. three passages in Isaiah that are thought to refer to the Messiah to come. "Messiah" means "anointed one," a title that was used of Israel's monarchs. The first two passages express a more immediate vision of the messianic advent (Isaiah 7:14-16 & 9:2-7) whereas this passage indicates a growing sense that the Messiah might be in the future, beyond the lifetime of the prophet. The vision of a peaceable kingdom in verses 6-9, point to the final consummation, the ultimate realization of God's kingdom plan, not something Isaiah probably expected to see with his own eyes. He prophesies from a stance of waiting, between what is & of what he hopes.

For waters shall break forth in the **wilderness** :: the reversal of physical disability, destruction and brokenness is also a radical healing in which nature (creation) participate, e.g. the desert becomes a place of marshes and swamps. In God, the wilderness is transformed from a journey of struggle into one of hope.

And the ransomed of the Lord:: this final verse is an exact duplicate of Isaiah 51:11. Exile is replaced by return. Despair is transformed into joy.

Matthew 11:2-11

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

²When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples ³and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" ⁴Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: ⁵the blind receive their sight, the *lame* walk, the *lepers* are cleansed, the **deaf** hear, the *dead* are raised, and the **POOR** have good news brought to them. ⁶And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me."

⁷As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the **wilderness** to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? ⁸What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. ⁹What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' ¹¹Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Luke 1:47-55

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

³⁹In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴²and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." ⁴⁶And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, ⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, ⁴⁸for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; ⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. ⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. ⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. ⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; ⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. ⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, ⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever." ⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.

At first glance it seems weird to jump to chapter 11 of Matthew, well past the birth story of Jesus. Yet the connection to our Advent journey is around the person, purpose and word of John the Baptizer, whom we see for the last time in Matthew's gospel here. In addition we hear the echo of Isaiah 35 in the description of how the world is changing because of the presence of Jesus in the world.

John the Baptist is in prison. Greatly different than incarceration in our contemporary world, prisoners had visitors coming and going, who even could stay with them. Prison was a waiting place before you were exonerated, exiled or executed. We know that he was arrested by King Herod for challenging him publicly, and that as a spineless demagogue ruler, he was tricked into executing this prophet whom he feared and admired. John is in the tension of waiting, undoubtedly anxious about what will happen, wondering how his life and actions have all been worth it.

The Blind see :: in Matthew 9:27-31 and Isaiah 29:18; 35:5

The *Lame Walk* :: in Matthew 9:2-8 and Isaiah 35:6

The lepers are cleansed :: in Matthew 8:1-4, but are not in Isaiah's language and prophetic writings

The deaf hear :: in Matthew 9:32-34 and Isaiah 35:5

The dead are raised :: in Matthew 9:18-19, 23-26 and Isaiah 26:19.

THE POOR ARE CARED FOR :: in Matthew 9:35-38 and Isaiah 29:19; 61:1-2; 42:7. The word for poor [ptochoi in Greek] refers to the destitute, the down and out, the desperate.

Matthew's description of Israel in the time of Jesus suggests and land and people in crisis. Jesus is looked to as healer and exorcist, resister of what's become the status quo and radical speaker/doer of hope.

Luke 1:47-55 :: this joyous song of Mary, known as the "Magnificat," again reinforces this image of a great reversal.

Questions for the practice of Examen & Contemplation

The scriptures lift up the way of God as one in which despair is transformed into hope, what is broken is made whole, exile if left for long-promised home. This is God's nature and promise, and what we believe to be the Messiah's purpose and passion, the meaning of Christmas.

***How have you experienced this joyous reversal in your life?**

***How do you hunger for such radical reversal in your life, our city, our world, today?**