

This week's Scripture - Sunday 13th December 2020 – Advent 3

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126 or Luke 1.46b-55; 1 Thessalonians 5.16-24; John 1.6-8, 19-28.

Isaiah 61.1-4, 8-11: The prophet spoke to the people, feeling God's spirit upon them. They were sent to bring good news to the people who came out of exile. God was with them, and God helped the people restore what was taken from them. The prophet concluded this portion by rejoicing in God, who restored the people and the prophet to a place of honour, like a garden putting forth new shoots.

Psalm 126 is a song about the return from exile, of the people returning home. The psalmist sings for joy, remembering how God did wonderful things for the people and how they rejoiced. The psalmist pleads for God to restore them once again, so that they might remember and give thanks for what God is continuing to do for them, even in difficult times.

Luke 1:46b-55: The Magnificat is an alternative for the psalm. Mary sings her song of praise, echoing the song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. She sings in response of what Elizabeth has said to her, telling her that God has blessed her, and sings to glorify God. Mary's vision of what God will do for the people echoes what Hannah sang, and what the prophets spoke of, that the proud are scattered in their thoughts, the lowly raised up. The powerful are brought down from their thrones. The hungry are filled with good things and the rich are sent away empty. God has remembered the promises of old, made to Abraham and Sarah and all their descendants.

1 Thessalonians 5.16-24: Paul urges the church in Thessalonica to be patient in their waiting. He encourages the church to rejoice always and pray without ceasing. Instead of a passive waiting, Paul urges an active waiting for Christ's return with prayer and steadfastness. They are to remember the teachings of the prophets, to hold fast to what is good and to resist evil, for God remains faithful.

John 1.6-8, 19-28: John's account of the story of John the Baptist speaks of John as the one who is not the light, but testifies to the light. In Matthew's account, Pharisees and Sadducees came to be baptized by Jesus, but in John's account, priests and Levites were sent by religious leaders to question John instead of being baptized by him. The writer of John places Jesus squarely at odds with the other religious officials for the most part (Nicodemus and Joseph of Arimathea being the exceptions). The priests and Levites question John the Baptist about who he is, but he doesn't claim to be the Messiah. Instead, he believes he is the voice crying out in the wilderness that the prophet Isaiah spoke about in chapter 40. However, they question John the Baptist further about why he is baptizing others, if he is not the Messiah, nor Elijah, who was to return before the Messiah came in their understanding. John the Baptist declares he baptizes with water, but there is one standing among them they do not recognize who will come after.

Reflection: We draw on our past experiences to help guide our steps into the future. As people of faith, we look to the stories of our ancestors and how God was faithful to remind us to keep faith in these trying times. In Advent, as we watch and actively wait for signs of God at work in the world and in our lives, we remember the stories of old, of God bringing the people out of exile, returning to their home and restoring who they were among the nations. Advent is a time of restoration—restoring our faith even while we wait. Renewing our hope. Proclaiming that God is still at work around us, while revealing what is to come.

Praying with others or alone...

Call to Worship

We magnify the Lord,

And we rejoice in God our Saviour

For the Mighty One has done great things for us,

And holy is God's name.

God's mercy is for all who are in awe,

From generation to generation.

God brings down the powerful and lifts up the lowly,

God fill the hungry with good things and sends the rich away empty.

According to the promise God made to our ancestors,

To Abraham and Sarah, and their descendants forever.

Prayer of Brokenness / Confession

Mighty One,

we confess that we cheer on the words of Mary and yet fail to put them into practice.

We sing her song and forget her call upon us to work for Your justice in this world.

Forgive us, O God, for not listening to her song. Forgive us, O God, for not heeding her wisdom.

Call us, O God, into the ways of justice, mercy, restoration and Good News

that Mary sang of long ago, when You resided in her womb,

Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Assurance of Forgiveness / Blessing

God looks upon us with favour when we turn back to God's ways.

God desires for us to love one another, to forgive one another;

for then we know God's love and forgiveness ourselves.

Go, care for each other's needs. Restore what has been lost, taken from others.

Take a look at your own faults, and do what you can to bring healing and make peace,

for Christ came to us when the angels, the heavenly host, the army of God,

sang Peace on Earth and Goodwill to All. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Prophets,

we hear the voices that call to us from the wilderness,

from the margins, but often we dismiss them.

We look to how we might simply live our own lives and try not to harm others,

but it is not enough.

This world is full of brokenness,

and the voices from the wilderness cry out to us

to make a way for You in our world and in our lives.

The powerful will be brought down and the lowly lifted up.

Call us to listen for the voices in the wilderness that are crying out to us, to change our ways,

to change the world, so that those on the margins, those who have faced oppression,

may simply live. Amen.