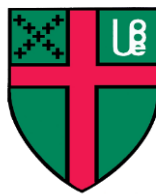


Reflections on Social Justice for the Season of Advent (Year A)

The Episcopal Networks Collaborative



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The Advent readings provide rich material for reflecting on social justice topics. Advent is a time of preparation for celebrating the coming of the Messiah, the coming of God's kingdom. The readings bring together the prophetic and Gospel traditions calling for a new social order based on peace and justice. Advent is a time to remember John the Baptist, the new Elijah who has come to challenge the rule of the men in soft robes who oppressed the poor. John the Baptist was preparing the way for the coming of the messiah – the one that would bring justice to the world, to all creation. It is a time for us to reflect on what "living in the light of the Lord" (Is. 2:5) obliges us to do in caring for each other and our planet.

The following questions may be useful in your sermon preparation:

- 1) What does our religious teaching say to us about..... (whatever the issue is).?
- 2) What does the secular culture teach and tell us (whatever the issue is)?
- 3) What is our personal experience with (Whatever the issue is)?
- 4) Compare 1, 2 and 3, where are there tensions? Similarities?
- 5) What are we called to do?
- 6) First steps?

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About the Readings

Optional parts of the readings are set off in square brackets.

The Bible texts of the Old Testament, Epistle and Gospel lessons are from the New Revised Standard Version Bible, copyright 1989 by the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Church of Christ in the USA.

The Collects, Psalms and Canticles are from the Book of Common Prayer, 1979.

Additional Resources

[Episcopal Networks Collaborative Issue Papers](#)

The following papers are included in this document:

Economic Justice Issues

The Widening of the Wealth Gap – Laura Russell
Taxes and Economic Justice – John Mark Summers and Laura Russell
The U.S. Housing Crisis and Political Repression – The Rev. Sarah Monroe
Trade Agreements -- The Rev. Dr. Christopher Johnson
Predatory Lending -- Verna Fausey and Laura Russell
Community Investing – Sue Lloyd and Verna Fausey
Community Investing Resources – ENEJ Community Investing Committee
Gender Inequality – Laura Russell
Equitable access to quality health care based on need – Laura Russell
Should we care about people in poverty? – Laura Russell
What is the Safety Net and why do we need it? – Laura Russell

Racial Justice Issues

Racial Oppression in America – Tiffany King
The Making of a Segregated Neighborhood – Laura Russell
Voting Rights – Joe McDaniel
White Privilege – Joe McDaniel
Policing Urban America – Michael Maloney
A015 – Anti-Racism/Diversity/Bias Awareness Training for Interim Bodies – Dr. Andrew Thompson

Environmental Justice Issues

A020 – Fossil Fuel Divestment and Reinvestment – Dr. Andrew Thompson
A011 – Oppose Environmental Racism – Dr. Andrew Thompson
Immigration Policy Issues
Within These Walls – Dianne Aid, TSSF
Immigration: The Special Role of the Church in the Interdisciplinary Work for Compassionate and Humane Immigration Policy – Dianne Aid, TSSF

Other Social Justice Issues

Incarceration in the USA – The Rev. Dr. Paula M. Jackson
Human Trafficking -- Sarah Leech and Laura Russell

These issue papers are intended to help the reader with material on suggested sermon topics for Advent.

ADVENT LECTIONARY PROJECT: JUSTICE, RECONCILIATION & HOPE

Three years have passed since the Episcopal Networks Collaborative offered a set of reflections for preaching and teaching in the RCL Advent Year A Lectionary with a keener awareness and critical eye toward matters of economic, racial, and environmental justice. In those three years national and statewide elections have changed and in many ways challenged the shape of our democracy, deaths by gun violence have become predictable and too often nearly unremarkable, climate chaos and continued degradation of the planet has accelerated, and hate crimes against black and brown people and migrants seeking a new home and a greater hope in the U.S. are at an appallingly high level. Yet, our preaching, too often, neglects these things and our preachers wonder why the gospel, in the words of one favorite hymn of prophetic witness, "goes unheard."

"The Networks Collaborative of The Episcopal Church seeks to reclaim the pulpit and the parish classroom with another set of reflections... now offered in a time of crisis in our nation, in our world, in our lives. We offer these things with humility and with confidence that God, who promises to be with the beloved communities of Sacred Creation, is forever true to the promise to make all things new. And in this sure hope we cry out -

Come, Lord Jesus, come!

A "collaborative" of justice-makers/advocates in The Episcopal Church – Episcopal Network for Economic Justice, Union of Black Episcopalians, and Episcopal Ecological Network – has taken a fresh look at the Revised Common Lectionary for Advent Year A in an effort to bring focused reflections on too-often overlooked justice and reconciliation themes in the portions of Scripture assigned for the start of the Church Year. We enter this project in a spirit mirroring the rich truths of Advent itself: with humility, with hope, and with joy. May your reading of these reflections lead you, through your teaching and preaching and in your prayer life, toward the places where God's reign is born and God's compassion is shown even in the midst of the broken and forsaken places of life.

We began this project in response to a comment voiced by our ecumenical friend Dr. Walter Brueggemann, emeritus professor of Old Testament at Columbia Theological Seminary in Decatur, Georgia. Referring to his perceived limits of lectionaries, Dr. Brueggemann says that too often the lectionary invites a failure of social-witness nerve in the preacher because it either 1) passes by texts with pronounced justice themes (e.g. edits in Psalm readings or neglected parts of Hebrew Scripture or early church Epistles) or 2) organizes the readings in a way that invites interpretations that concentrate on personal salvation and moralism to the neglect of social inequity and social transformations.

Quite a stunning claim from one of the great preachers of our day! And therefore we step forward with confidence to read the Revised Common Lectionary with new attention thanks to our Brother Walter, who invites this effort first in humble service:

"The Bible is not a fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read; rather, a 'script,' always re-read, through which the Spirit makes all things new. When the church adjudicates between the inherent and the circumstance-situated, it is sorely tempted to settle, close and idolize. Therefore, inherency of an evangelical

kind demands a constant resistance to familiarity. Nobody's reading is final and inerrant, precisely because the key Character in the book who creates, redeems and consummates is always beyond us in holy hiddenness."

("Biblical Authority" *Christian Century*, January 3-10, 2001)

Ours is first a call to resist readings that "settle, close and idolize" preaching in Advent. For some in our Collaborative, the four (4) Sundays of the traditional Western Church Advent are being expanded and enriched by adding the last three (3) Sundays of Pentecost to form an Advent of seven (7) Sundays. This practice has long historical roots, expressed today in the churches of Eastern Orthodoxy, and renders special attention to the reign of God themes associated with All Saints, Holy Wisdom, and Christ the King Sunday. In any case, with or without this expansion, our reflections encourage the preacher/teacher to take more care with the eschatological setting of a proper Advent worship, and not see the season as a hurried gallop through familiar narratives only done to get to the birth on Christmas Day.

To some, Advent preaching for justice and peace might just seem too much like a comment on Capitol Hill legislative advocacy relayed by contemporary theologian Jennifer R. Ayers: "You've got a small group of dedicated people who are in there pitching, and a few people around the side that pay attention, and a lot of people who don't even know there's something going on. And so you always have the feeling that you're attacking an iceberg with an ice pick...But still, some people *do* listen, and it does *some* good. And they say, even glaciers move every now and then." (*Waiting for a Glacier to Move: Practicing Social Witness*, Princeton Theological Monograph Series, 2011).

Certainly, we trust that these reflections will be of help to the preachers and teachers who dare use them. They also should stir some dissent as people think beyond what Brueggemann calls the "fixed, frozen, readily exhausted read." That, in our judgment, is okay as well. What we most hope for is more robust, more daring, and more trusting preaching and teaching in Advent – the critical starting point of the Church's proclamation of Good News of great joy and hope to the world. We surely will need help in doing all this, and for that help we must pray.

We close this invitation to the enter into Advent reflections with our Collaborative offering a prayer from another champion of peace and justice witness, the late Ernest T. Campbell, sometime senior pastor of The Riverside Church in New York City:

O God who is always coming into our worlds and into our lives,

Give us keener self-understanding – as keen as we can bear at one sitting – lest we think of ourselves more highly, or more lowly, than we ought.

Give us a sense of what is vital in life, lest we squander our years and waste our attention on inflated trifles.

Give us a due regard for our unity with all people, lest we think in tribal patterns and forget that you are Lover of all the earth.

We ask of you the most meaningful Advent season we have ever known:

Drive us to our knees;

to the Book; to an awareness of our sin; to a careful searching of our virtues; to a serious examination of words and terms so glibly sung and spoken.

Measure us, O God, according to your justice, but take not your mercy from us.

And grant that when Christmas morning breaks for us this year, we may have something more to show for our much running about than tired feet, wrapped presents, and regrets for cards not sent.

When you said, 'Seek my face,' my heart said unto you, 'Your face, O God, will I seek.'

Through Jesus Christ our Savior. AMEN.

*The Rev. Richard Burnett
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First Sunday of Advent

Year A, (RCL)

Isaiah 2:1-5
Romans 13:11-14
Matthew 24:36-44
Psalm 122

The Collect

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness, and put on the armor of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to visit us in great humility; that in the last day, when he shall come again in his glorious majesty to judge both the living and the dead, we may rise to the life immortal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Isaiah 2:1-5

The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem.

In days to come
the mountain of the LORD's house
shall be established as the highest of the mountains,
and shall be raised above the hills;
all the nations shall stream to it.
Many peoples shall come and say,
'Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD,
to the house of the God of Jacob;
that he may teach us his ways
and that we may walk in his paths.'
For out of Zion shall go forth instruction,
and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem.
He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.

O house of Jacob,
 come, let us walk
 in the light of the LORD!

The Response

Psalm 122

Laetatus sum

- 1 I was glad when they said to me, *
 "Let us go to the house of the LORD."
- 2 Now our feet are standing *
 within your gates, O Jerusalem.
- 3 Jerusalem is built as a city *
 that is at unity with itself;
- 4 To which the tribes go up,
 the tribes of the LORD, *
 the assembly of Israel,
 to praise the Name of the LORD.
- 5 For there are the thrones of judgment, *
 the thrones of the house of David.
- 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: *
 "May they prosper who love you.
- 7 Peace be within your walls *
 and quietness within your towers.
- 8 For my brethren and companions' sake, *
 I pray for your prosperity.
- 9 Because of the house of the LORD our God, *
 I will seek to do you good."

The Epistle

Romans 13:11-14

You know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

The Gospel

Matthew 24:36-44

Jesus said to the disciples, “But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. Then two will be in the field; one will be taken and one will be left. Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.”

Possible Justice Themes

- Humility
- Peace / Non-violence
- Cooperation
- Unity
- Readiness

Reflections

The Gospel passage does not refer to social justice but calls on Christians to be ready for the coming of God’s reign and that includes laying aside the works of darkness (think of banking practices causing recessions, usurious interest rates, racism, pollution, world hunger) and putting on the armor of light called for in the Epistle.

If we read further in Matthew 24, Jesus warns against “beating his fellow servants” and other unruly behavior. What form does beating one’s fellow servants take today? Material can be found in our [issue papers](#).

The Isaiah passages include the prophetic call to turn from war to peace, thus enabling more sustainable agriculture and better care for the land. When we look at the news from Syria we see a land ravaged by drought and war. There is no green at all in the news shots, and the people are fleeing from violence, lack of water and food, and lack of a future. A contrasting example is the restoration of the Iraqi marshes after the worst of the fighting there was halted. Now there is plenty of room, water, and resources for the people as well as sea life. If all our resources are poured into making war we cannot provide for ourselves and our children and we ruin the fecundity and beauty of the earth. Speaking, acting and working against unjust policies is a part of our call.

Psalms 122 and 146 are hymns of praise but if we go instead to Psalm 146, the Lord sets the prisoners free, opens eyes, watches over strangers, upholds the orphan and widow. But when the Messiah

came he told us to feed the hungry, cure the sick, and help the impoverished, and told us to follow him. I think we are expected to do much more than pray for food and justice. At the same time we can certainly continue to pray for assistance and unexpected blessings while we work to make a difference in the world.

Putting on the “armor of light” calls for a change in the way we live. Climate change which appears to be a hopeless, huge problem; however, we are not called to sit back and moan, but to keep on working to make a difference. Meanwhile we hope and pray that God will not let his incredible creation go down to dust. What might be the unexpected thing or process that God will bring about? In Isaiah 2:1-5, God’s righteous rule will be established and this will be attractive to all peoples. It will be a reign of shalom – peace and justice. This reign can begin now among God’s people who are his imagers and ambassadors.

Swords into Ploughshares? Be careful what you wish for...

Written by Phina Borgeson¹

Every year in the late fall, here on the 38th parallel in California, I plant my fava beans and garlic. So when The First Sunday in Advent rolls around, I’m usually wondering what the garlic is doing underground, and checking to see if the favas have begun their slow growth toward spring. Seasonally appropriate agricultural thoughts - - waiting, expecting, hoping. How is the garlic doing in its secret life of preparation? Will the favas emerge healthy and strong, and come spring be fixing lots of nitrogen for next summer’s crops while producing tasty legumes?

On this First Sunday in Advent, Year A, we have an image drawn from agriculture, an image from Isaiah signaling peace and prosperity in the Messianic Age.

*He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.*

¹References

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The verse and its context, describing the gathering of the nations, has a parallel in Micah 4:3. For generations “swords into ploughshares” has been a watchword for movements seeking peace with justice.

A plowshare is a blade attached to the beam of a plow: it is the part which turns the earth over as the plow moves through it. Poorer Israelites sometimes had plows where all the parts were wooden, though iron plowshares were preferable. Metallurgy was not a well developed craft among them, so those who did have iron plowshares took them to the neighboring Philistines for sharpening. Thus it was a tool most useful in peace time, when relations with the often bellicose neighbors were good.

Wrestling with the basic idea of turning an implement of war into something useful in everyday life, in the context of a time of peace and prosperity, I realized that not every such transformation turns out well. Some may have unintended consequences.

In the early twentieth century, German chemists, Fritz Haber and Carl Bosch, developed an energy intensive process for synthesizing ammonia from atmospheric nitrogen. Plant available, it was useful as fertilizer; but it's most significant use was in explosives during World War I, when imports of natural supplies of ammonia were short in Germany.

During World War II many of the major powers were producing large quantities of synthetic nitrogen using the Haber-Bosch process, but at war's end only the ten plants in the United States were still functioning. Peace meant a surplus of nitrates, sold as fertilizer, used to feed a booming post war population.

Swords into ploughshares? Perhaps at first. And then as part of the Green Revolution.

But the accelerating use of synthetic nitrogen has not supported peaceful relations with our air, water, and soils. It has resulted in the loss of carbon and nitrogen in soils over time. The move to maximize grain yields, of which these fertilizers are a key component, has a negative long term impact on soils needed to sustain our global food system.

Nitrogen runoff from croplands have worsened municipal water quality in some places. Runoff downstream, into coastal waters, is widespread. Consider the Gulf of Mexico's dead zone with its algal blooms and lack of dissolved oxygen.

Synthetic fertilizer is also a major contributor of greenhouse gases. Three to five percent annu-

ally of the world's supply of natural gas is used in Haber-Bosch production. Nitrogen gases, arising from the fertilizer's use, are up to 300 times more potent in the greenhouse effect than carbon dioxide.

The United States uses about 12% of the world's synthetic nitrogen fertilizer and about half of that is used to grow corn. About 40% of the corn is used to produce ethanol; roughly 36% is fed to cattle, pigs and chickens, who in turn contribute their share of greenhouse gases; and most of the rest is exported. Only a small fraction is used to feed humans, mostly as sweeteners.

Productive mono-cropping made possible by synthetic nitrogen reduces biodiversity in our managed environment, diminishing resilience in the face of climate change.

The unintended consequences of what at one time must have seemed a real "swords into ploughshares" story leaves me pondering what might be some better examples and images for our time. Where can we look to find the metaphors for turning implements and methods of violence into tools and processes that bring people together? How shall we sign the transformation from conflict and war to peace with justice and well-being for all?

Second Sunday of Advent

Year A (RCL)

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

The Collect

Merciful God, who sent your messengers the prophets to preach repentance and prepare the way for our salvation: Give us grace to heed their warnings and forsake our sins, that we may greet with joy the coming of Jesus Christ our Redeemer; who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Isaiah 11:1-10

A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.

The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD.

His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;

but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;

he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.

Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,

the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

The cow and the bear shall graze,
their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp,
and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den.

They will not hurt or destroy
on all my holy mountain;
for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD
as the waters cover the sea.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him,
and his dwelling shall be glorious.

The Response

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Deus, judicium

- 1 Give the King your justice, O God, *
and your righteousness to the King's Son;
- 2 That he may rule your people righteously *
and the poor with justice;
- 3 That the mountains may bring prosperity to the people, *
and the little hills bring righteousness.
- 4 He shall defend the needy among the people; *
he shall rescue the poor and crush the oppressor.
- 5 He shall live as long as the sun and moon endure, *
from one generation to another.
- 6 He shall come down like rain upon the mown field, *
like showers that water the earth.
- 7 In his time shall the righteous flourish; *
there shall be abundance of peace till the moon shall be no more.
- 18 Blessed be the Lord GOD, the God of Israel, *
who alone does wondrous deeds!
- 19 And blessed be his glorious Name for ever! *
and may all the earth be filled with his glory.
Amen. Amen.

The Epistle

Romans 15:4-13

Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, so that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. For I tell you that 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. As it is written,

"Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles,
and sing praises to your name";
and again he says,

"Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people";
and again,

"Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles,
and let all the peoples praise him";
and again Isaiah says,

"The root of Jesse shall come,
the one who rises to rule the Gentiles;
in him the Gentiles shall hope."

May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

The Gospel

Matthew 3:1-12

In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said,

"The voice of one crying out in the wilderness:
'Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight.'"

Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? Bear fruit worthy of repentance. Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire.

"I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

Possible Justice Themes

- Income Inequality / Wealth Inequality
- Cooperation
- Advocating for the Poor

Reflections

The passages from Isaiah promise the Messiah will judge the poor with righteousness and decide with equity for the meek of the earth. Our country judges the poor with harshness, imprisons them, confines them to violent neighborhoods, exposes them to environmental hazards, and maintains segregated schools and neighborhoods. Isaiah 11:1-10 The coming of the Lord Jesus seen as a time to reconcile all things to the pristine pre-Fall Adamic age. His first coming inaugurated this kingdom but its fullness will be realized in the future at the time of new creation – new heavens and new earth. That will be the time of establishment of full justice. In the psalm there is hope that the Lord will inspire the leader/king to create a more just life. Here the meaning is surely aimed at both the economic situation as well as oppression by the system. The psalm repeats the call for justice for the poor and for the needy. The psalm also calls for peace and suggests protection of the earth which reflects God's glory. Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19: oh that justice may be experienced due to righteous ruling of Solomon whose rule here foreshadows that of Jesus the Messiah. In the Gospel, John the Baptist comes with his message calling on Israel to confess its sins (think of income inequality, child poverty, the school to prison pipeline, racism, the treatment of immigrants) and to repent. Matthew 3:1-12 As much as John's message was welcomed by the Jews who had all along looked forward to the coming of the promised messiah, his message of justice in preparation for the coming of this Jewish Messiah for the whole world was not welcomed by non-Jews. His message was a disruption of the economic and social "order" that he was calling.

Third Sunday of Advent

Year A (RCL)

Isaiah 35:1-10

James 5:7-10

Matthew 11:2-11

Psalm 146:4-9

or Canticle 15 [*or* Canticle 3]

The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever.

Amen.

Old Testament

Isaiah 35:1-10

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;
like the crocus it 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.

Strengthen the weak hands,
and make firm the feeble knees.

Say 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."

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;
then 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;
the 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.

A 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.
No 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.
And 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.

The Response

Psalm 146:4-9

Lauda, anima mea

- 4 Happy are they who have the God of Jacob for their help! *
whose hope is in the LORD their God;
- 5 Who made heaven and earth, the seas, and all that is in them; *
who keeps his promise for ever;
- 6 Who gives justice to those who are oppressed, *
and food to those who hunger.
- 7 The LORD sets the prisoners free;
the LORD opens the eyes of the blind; *
the LORD lifts up those who are bowed down;
- 8 The LORD loves the righteous;
the LORD cares for the stranger; *
he sustains the orphan and widow,
but frustrates the way of the wicked.
- 9 The LORD shall reign for ever, *
your God, O Zion, throughout all generations.
Hallelujah!

or

Canticle 15 Page 91, BCP

The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; *
for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed: *
the Almighty has done great things for me, and holy is his Name.
He has mercy on those who fear him *
in every generation.
He has shown the strength of his arm, *
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.
He has cast down the mighty from their thrones, *
and has lifted up the lowly.
He has filled the hungry with good things, *
and the rich he has sent away empty.
He has come to the help of his servant Israel, *
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,
The promise he made to our fathers, *
to Abraham and his children for ever.

Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit: *
as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. *Amen.*

The Epistle

James 5:7-10

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

The Gospel

Matthew 11:2-11

When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples and said to him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus answered them, “Go and tell John what you hear and see: the 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. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.”

As 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? What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written,

‘See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
who will prepare your way before you.’

“Truly 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.”

Possible Justice Themes

- Empowerment of the marginalized
- Welcoming the stranger (Immigrant)
- Ecology – the land

Reflections

Just Society, Restored Creation

Written by Phina Borgeson

The renewal of creation involves the remaking of human society, and human society is entirely dependent upon the preservation, repair, and renewal of creation. -- Ellen F. Davis in *Biblical Prophecy: Perspectives for Christian Theology, Discipleship, and Ministry*.

In chapter six of her volume in the *Interpretation* series, Davis stresses the continuity of all creatures and the three way covenant among God, humanity, and non-human creation. The people of Hebrew scripture were largely agrarian, and hence saw connections and parallels between what was happening culturally and what was happening to the land.

We find this in the Law as well as the Prophets, and we see it in the passage appointed for the Third Sunday in Advent Year A, Isaiah 35:1-10. When we listen deeply to these familiar verses, we hear that these associations are no facile metaphors or clever similes, but deep connections, a co-inherence of what happens to the people and what happens to the rest of nature.

In today's world, the urban majority, without an intimate, daily experience of the working landscape, may miss these relationships. In *The History of the World in Seven Cheap Things*, authors Raj Patel and Jason W. Moore discuss the split between Nature and Society arising in sixteenth century Europe. This conceptual division, allowing all of life to be sorted into one category or the other, provided a framework that not only supported the pillaging of Nature, but the exploitation of indigenous peoples and people of color who were considered by colonizers and slavers as Nature, not Society.

In other words, when everything gets divided on the basis of this dichotomy, we get in big trouble. Sorting today's issues into two realms of social injustice and ecological crisis has a way of intensifying both, making them more difficult to address. Revisiting the biblical worldview of one creation that includes it all can call us back to a holistic approach.

Environmental justice is one banner under which to consider and address the systems that despoil our planet and hurt human communities. In its beginnings the environmental justice movement addressed specific concerns of communities overburdened with pollutants. Most were urban and made up of people of color; some were rural, particularly those of indigenous people on reservations. The situations were known as examples of environmental racism.

From these roots, environmental justice advocates of late have begun to branch out and consider how to address any overburdened community in a positive way; that is, how to practice planning so that it considers positive environmental values and includes the voices of the people affected. The challenge is to build communities that are resilient ecologically and economically, seeing these two as interdependent. It's about broadening the concept of environmental justice, so it is no longer seen as simply reactive, but an active movement for healthy communities.

As a church we continue in the tradition of Isaiah and the other prophets. How do we exercise our collective voice in ways that help us reconnect concern for people and concern for the whole community of life which includes us? How do we help lower the barrier between Society and Nature? How shall we re-present the picture of streams in the desert and the healing of racism, poverty, and other human ills as one vision?

The World is Waking Up

Written by Steven Simpkins

"Strengthen the weak hands and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those of a fearful heart 'be strong do not fear'"... Isa. 35:3-4,

Amidst Amazon forest fires, disparate income inequality, rising sea levels, political gridlock, and all-around global distrust a sixteen year-old took to the global stage and voiced her concerns at the United Nations Climate Actions Summit in late September 2019. Greta Thunberg pointedly captured the pain and sorrow of her generation due to collapsing ecosystems, death, and amoral economic growth. She painted a grim reality while maintaining tenuous optimism saying:

You (global leaders) say you hear us (climate activists) and that you understand the urgency. But no matter how sad and angry I am, I do not want to believe that. Because if you really understood the situation and still kept failing to act then you would be evil. And that I refuse to believe... You are failing us. But the young people are starting to understand your betrayal. The eyes of future generations are upon you. And if you choose to fail us, I say: We will never forgive you. We will not let you get away with this... The world is waking up. And change is coming whether you like it or not.

It seems the world is at a crossroads wherein the possibility of blossoming, abundance, and everlasting joy mentioned in Isaiah 35 are tempered by our socio-economic realities.

Humanity's tendency to abuse the Community of Creation, including our own neighbors, along with projected ecological forecasts lends itself to a particularly bleak outlook. It seems our task as Christ followers is to live in this ambiguity. We must advocate for our neighbors who are abused by an economic system that takes no prisoners. Our neighbors who live on island nations at risk of becoming refugees due to ecological crisis, neighbors whose labor is exploited for the benefit of stockholders, neighbors who produce our food but live as political scapegoats, neighbors whose voices and cries of distress go unheard/are dismissed because of their identities (ethnicity, gender expression, race, sex, economic class, etc.). However, we must not forget/willfully ignore the unspoken concerns and rights of our environmental neighbors as humanity throughout history has done.

Where can we find optimism in such a bleak picture? Is it worth the physical/mental/spiritual stress to commit to such drastic societal changes? Where do we begin in our pursuit to be better stewards of the Community of Creation? All this I am not sure of; however, I do believe we must do something because as Thunberg says "the world is waking up." The uncertainty of the future calls to mind Mary's proclamation that God will lift up the lowly, fill the hungry with good things, and send the rich away empty. Mary saw the adversity around her and trusted that God would be present with the Oppressed. Despite her fear of the future her faith persisted. In this case nearly the entirety of the Community of Creation is crying out in agony pleading for change. Perhaps Climate Change is serving the role of prophet; acting as a messenger warning of things to come. A modern-day John the Baptist. Throughout scripture God communicates with people through clouds, weather, and nature so God's communication through Climate Change seems well within reason. God's embodiment of Climate Change is not in the negative manifestations that are bound to bring death and suffering, but rather in the responses of hope and love. God is present in the persistence of life across the globe; the species that have found new habitats. God is present in the potentiality for alternative energies. God is present in aiding the oppressed through their daily struggles that result from environmental and economic exploitation.

God is present in voices like Greta Thunberg's pleading for global action and unity. God is the ever-optimistic voice saying "Do not fear!"

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Year A (RCL)

Isaiah 7:10-16
Romans 1:1-7
Matthew 1:18-25
Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

The Collect

Purify our conscience, Almighty God, by your daily visitation, that your Son Jesus Christ, at his coming, may find in us a mansion prepared for himself; who lives and reigns with you, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. *Amen.*

Old Testament

Isaiah 7:10-16

Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. Then Isaiah said: “Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.”

The Response

Psalm 80:1-7, 16-18

Qui regis Israel

- 1 Hear, O Shepherd of Israel, leading Joseph like a flock; *
shine forth, you that are enthroned upon the cherubim.
- 2 In the presence of Ephraim, Benjamin, and Manasseh, *
stir up your strength and come to help us.
- 3 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 4 O LORD God of hosts, *
how long will you be angered
despite the prayers of your people?
- 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears; *
you have given them bowls of tears to drink.
- 6 You have made us the derision of our neighbors, *
and our enemies laugh us to scorn.

- 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.
- 16 Let your hand be upon the man of your right hand, *
the son of man you have made so strong for yourself.
- 17 And so will we never turn away from you; *
give us life, that we may call upon your Name.
- 18 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; *
show the light of your countenance, and we shall be saved.

The Epistle

Romans 1:1-7

Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ,

To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints:

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

The Gospel

Matthew 1:18-25

Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

Possible Justice Themes

- New order (Globalization)
- Lifting the marginalized

Reflection

The passage from Isaiah and the psalm remind us of our need for deliverance. There are trials ahead and we need the light of God's countenance. What does promise mean to us now and how do we find this light? Isaiah 7:10-16: The Lord is faithful to keep his promises. He doesn't renege, or else that would be unrighteousness (injustice or being unjust), which would be contrary to his character and nature. Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19: A lament and a prayer of plea to God for the deliverance of his people – to give them justice from the God of justice. The Epistle reminds us of our calling to belong to Jesus Christ. This means living our baptismal covenant. Being a Jesus person is not just about personal piety. It is about bringing about a more just, green and peaceful world starting right where we are. Matthew 1:18-25: Jesus' birth and coming was not only miraculous (virgin conception) but was also a fulfillment of God's promise through his prophets, e.g. in Isaiah 7:14. This promise was for a new era, the messianic era. In this era, human relationships would change. The new order is spelled out in succeeding chapters of Matthew's gospel. Chapter 5 includes the Beatitudes. The blessed are declared not to be the rich and powerful, but the poor in spirit, the gentle, and the merciful.

Reflection on Psalm 122 from 2016 Edition

ADVENT WEEK 1 YEAR A

The U.S. elections are barely behind us and many of us were disturbed by the verbal content of debates and as they have been for many years ads focusing on creating mistrust in opponents instead of focusing on the serious social and environmental issues facing our country and the rest of the world.

For decades we have become a house divided by manipulation of money, power and natural resources being carried out behind the facade of the "Halls of Justice and Democracy".

I think like many when I am face to face with government iconic buildings, especially in Washington D.C., the pride that was instilled in me as a child sets in and I think everything is OK, normal, "Democracy as usual".

We are the "tribes" now, living and working in our own communities. There is a disconnect between those iconic halls in Washington DC that wants us to believe that the power brokers believe and treat all citizens as equal, we are far, far, far from being unified and at peace. The litany is long: Ferguson, Dallas, Baltimore, Charlotte, Standing Rock...

The Psalmist calls on the people to pray for Jerusalem for its unity and peace. We are called also to not give up hope but to pray for unity and peace with dignity for all. Prayer has several facets: contemplation, intercession, confession, thanksgiving and prayer through action.

Indeed, let us pray for the houses of our nations.

Alternative Reflections

ADVENT WEEK 3 YEAR A

The passage from Isaiah is a call for compassion, a call to protect the land (wilderness and dry places) and the people (weak hands, feeble knees) who live on it. Who are these people with weak hands and feeble knees? People asking refugee status at our borders. People experiencing hunger here and abroad. People of color and immigrants who fear police maltreatment. How can our parishioners open the eyes of the blind and unstop the ears of the deaf? Isaiah 35:1-10: Restoration of God's people in the land God gave them was pivotal to the covenant relationship. However, in addition, this promise is also about establishment of God's justice and shalom on the earth that would be brought by Jesus Christ, which we experience in the interim, but the fullness of which is yet to come. The psalm mentions justice for the oppressed and food for the hungry, caring for the stranger (think immigrants) and widows and orphans. Psalm 146:5-10: As the maker and sustainer of all creation, God is righteous and just and he promises justice among his creation. Vv.5-6 is summary; vv.6-9 is elaboration.

The *Magnificat* echoes the theme about a new order presented by John the Baptist. The mighty are cast down from their thrones, the lowly lifted up. The Gospel returns us to John the Baptist's ministry and his challenge to the men in soft robes. Jesus contracts John to them and offers his own miracles as proof that the redeemer has come. "... the poor have good news brought to them" (vs. 3).

The Epistle offers an exhortation to piety. But if we include alongside these verses and include the first six verses of James 5, the tone is quite different. These verses offer a strong condemnation of the accumulation of wealth (think widening wealth gap) and the cheating of laborers who tend the fields (think wage theft).

ALTERNATIVE REFLECTION FOR ADVENT 3 YEAR A

JUSTICE LENS: The Widening Wealth Gap.

Written by Dianne Aid

Psalm 146:5-10

This psalm has a very familiar ring of the words Jesus read as he embarked on his public ministry (Luke 4:16-20). The words are God's mandate to liberate the oppressed, let the prisoners go free and feed the hungry.

The Psalmist captures this message which is found throughout Scripture.

The *Magnificat*, which is an alternative reading for this Psalm speaks of "lifting up the lowly, the hungry will be fed and the rich will be sent away empty" (Luke :46b-55).

The Luke version of the Beatitudes (Luke 6:20-26) reads "Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the Kingdom of God" (vs 20) "But woe to you who are rich for you have already received comfort" (vs 24).

Both the Psalm and the *Magnificat* set liberation in the context of un-abiding devotion to God the Creator, God is the hope, the giver of life.

We as Christians are called to provide for the hungry, release the prisoners, liberate the oppressed. We do not have to look very far to know the hungry, the prisoners and the oppressed in our communities.

The rich live with the risk of attachment to material wealth. There is fear that attempts to close the wealth gap will threaten the well-being and lifestyle some are accustomed to. These attachments leave a spiritual void. Letting go is a pathway to freedom, freeing our spirits to find the joy of knowing God and regathering around the table with the hungry to be filled with physical and spiritual food.