

Divergence on the Lectionary - Third Sunday of Advent, Year B

First Reading

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 (omitted verses in italics)

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor;
he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to grant to those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit;
that they may be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.
They shall build up the ancient ruins;
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

*Strangers shall stand and tend your flocks;
foreigners shall be your plowmen and vinedressers;
but you shall be called the priests of the LORD;
they shall speak of you as the ministers of our God;
you shall eat the wealth of the nations,
and in their glory you shall boast.
Instead of your shame there shall be a double portion;
instead of dishonor they shall rejoice in their lot;
therefore in their land they shall possess a double portion;
they shall have everlasting joy.*

For I the LORD love justice;
I hate robbery and wrong;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their offspring shall be known among the nations,
and their descendants in the midst of the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge them,
that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD;
my soul shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself like a priest with a beautiful headdress,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
For as the earth brings forth its sprouts,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to sprout up before all the nations. (ESV)

Second Reading

1 Thessalonians 5:16–24

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise prophecies, but test everything; hold fast what is good. Abstain from every form of evil.

Now may the God of peace himself sanctify you completely, and may your whole spirit and soul and body be kept blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. He who calls you is faithful; he will surely do it. (ESV)

Gospel Text

John 1:6-8, 19-28 (omitted verses in italics)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

The true light, which gives light to everyone, was coming into the world. He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world did not know him. He came to his own, and his own people did not receive him. But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God, who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth. (John bore witness about him, and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks before me, because he was before me.'") For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. No one has ever seen God; the only God, who is at the Father's side, he has made him known.

And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said."

(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) They asked him, "Then why are you baptizing, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" John answered them, "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know, even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie." These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptizing. (ESV)

Comments and Questions for Discussion

First Reading

Our passage from Isaiah this week comes from that third portion of the book of the prophet sometimes called "Trito Isaiah." (Third Isaiah) This is an oracle given for the people of Israel either just after or just before the return from Exile, depending on which scholar you're reading. Whether before or after doesn't seem to make too much difference to me, as the purpose remains the same, to encourage God's people who are returning to the devastation that the Babylonians left behind in Judah and Jerusalem.

Imagine being one of the residents of Maui who were driven from their homes by the fires. When you return, not just your home, but your entire neighborhood is ash. Or the people of Colorado who lost everything to the Boulder fire or one of the other wildfires. When the firefighters finally deem it safe to return, you go back to see if there is anything, anything that you can recover. Nearly everything is gone.

This is what I imagine it must have been like for God's people, returning home from Babylon. God's word to them through the prophet is one of hope and restoration.

I am taken by the way that the voice of the speaker changes from the first to the second to the third section of the oracle. At the beginning the speaker is clearly the one who has been called to speak hope on the Lord's behalf. In the second section (beginning after the omitted verses) God speaks directly to the people in the first person (through the prophet). In the third, the people respond in praise and thanksgiving for all that God will do/has done. God's declaration that these things are to come is enough to speak of them as though they already have occurred. This assurance is enough to guarantee that "righteousness and praise" will "sprout up before all nations."

I would be remiss if I did not take note of the fact that Jesus chose the first several verses of this reading for His first sermon in Nazareth, declaring that the verses He read had been fulfilled in their hearing. This tells me that this prophecy was 1) held dear by God's people even then though 2) they knew that, even more than five centuries later, it had not yet been fulfilled.

That posture of long held and long unfulfilled anticipation seems to speak loudly into a Church that has waited long for the Lord's return. At the same time, Jesus' appropriation of these verses says something quite startling. That which we have longed for has been fulfilled in our hearing of them. There is a sense in which the hearing of the words actually manifests the future we have been hoping for. As the people of Judah cry out "I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul shall exult in my God, for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation; he has covered me with the robe of righteousness," even as they set foot in the ruins of Jerusalem. This prophecy invites me, invites us to do the same. Live as the manifestation of righteousness and peace that has been given to us, whether we or the world around us can see it or not.

Second Reading

Here on the Third Sunday of Advent it seems fitting that we should return to some of the closing verses of Paul's first letter to the Thessalonians. A people sorely tried by the ridicule of their neighbors for having chosen Jesus over the emperor cult that dominated the culture in which they found themselves, they were especially vulnerable when it came to the deaths of their co-believers. Their faith in the eternal life that was theirs in Jesus was shaken, and Paul buoys them up with the promise of the Lord's imminent return and the place of those who have suffered death in that glorious Day. (For more detail on what I think the setting/purpose of 1 Thessalonians was, see my short Introduction to 1 Thessalonians I wrote several weeks ago.)

Paul seems to take a different tack than Jesus did in reassuring a shaken people. Jesus declares the prophecies fulfilled (see above) but Paul points the eyes of the Thessalonians to the future return of Jesus. When first considering this difference I find myself wanting to decide which is the better approach. Of course, if I have to choose, I'll choose with Jesus. But then I think that choosing one over the other may be a mistake. They are both here for me in Scripture, so surely they both have value. Perhaps the insight for me here is that the correct approach will vary according the situation and the ability of the hearers to process one or the other. I think I am called to avoid disdain either, but to be discerning. (Why can't it ever be simple?)

Gospel Text

Here in the third Sunday of Advent, regardless of the Lectionary Year, our focus remains on the Baptist and his proclamation of the One who is to come after him. Mark, however, has so little about John in the opening chapters of his Gospel that the folks preparing our lectionary shift to John for Advent III. At least that's why I think they do it. Our three year lectionary cycle doesn't include much of the Fourth Gospel, so I'm grateful for the times that we read it on Sundays. The brevity of Mark's Gospel means that we'll see more of John this year than in any other. (I think.)

What's worth noting in this week's reading is the subtle but important shift in the perception of the Baptist in the fourth Gospel. John's function as one who baptizes seems to take a back seat to one who "testifies" to Jesus' identity. We only get the smallest glimpse of this in our reading this week, but it's there. "This is the testimony of John." Unlike Mark's Gospel, in which John functions more as an example of one who looks for the wrong sort of Messiah, the Baptist in John's Gospel looks like an ideal follower of Jesus. He testifies to Jesus' identity and he even convinces two of his own disciples to follow Jesus. (This happens only a bit later.) Giving testimony to who Jesus is/was and leading others into following Him make the Baptist a much more prototypical early Christian than the image of John in any of the synoptic Gospels.

From the beginning of John to the end, the driving purpose of the Gospel seems to be to bring people to belief in Jesus. "Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." (John 20:30-31, ESV) While that can be said of any of the four Gospels, I don't think that any of them are as singularly focused on this as John. Matthew's Gospel seems to presume the belief of the reader and focus more on how the community lives out that belief. Mark's Gospel seems (to me) to be focused on someone who is preparing to be baptized and to confront that catechumen with a choice between the Baptist's version of the Messiah and the evangelist's. Luke's larger focus is presenting Jesus to the

Gentile world, but perhaps more importantly, to do so in a way that seeks to heal rifts between Jewish and Gentile believers. The Fourth Gospel begins and ends with testimony and is populated with “signs” intended to stir faith in the reader/hearer.

I think that, while we get little of the teaching of the Baptist in John’s Gospel, which all the synoptics agree pointed toward a Davidic ruler of some sort, we still see in our reading for this week a hint of the tension between those who followed John and held his expectations and the followers of Jesus. In John, the Baptist denies himself more clearly than anywhere else, “He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, ‘I am not the Christ.’” This seems to me to bear some similarity to the tension in Mark between who Jesus really was/is and the proclamation of John in his Gospel, not the last relationship between Mark’s and John’s Gospels we’ll see this year.