

3rd Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; Matthew 11:2-11; James 5:7-10

Isaiah 35:1-10 is a joyful and hopeful hymn of God's actions to redeem and ransom God's people from exile. Isaiah is normally divided at chapter forty into First Isaiah (1-39) and Second Isaiah (chs. 40 through at least ch. 55). The two books begin and end with the people praising God for God's deliverance of them. Thus, First Isaiah ends with the joyful hymn that comprises the Old Testament lesson for the 3rd Sunday of Advent (Isaiah 36 through 39 is an historical interlude that seems inserted between the two books). And Second Isaiah begins by picking up that joyful hymn with a psalm of its own. Both hymns are on the same topic: God's deliverance of Israel from captivity to and exile in the land of the Babylonians. Both describe the return of the exiles, joyfully praising God for their deliverance. And the desert through which they are traveling is somehow miraculously transformed into the most abundant pastures as they march rejoicing toward Jerusalem.

Isaiah 35 begins, "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" (35:1-2). The exiles have been freed from their Babylonian captivity, and as they start to return to Jerusalem and to their homeland, God goes before them turning the desert wastes into a pasture blooming with life and verdant with flowers and blossoms. In both their liberation from slavery and through the transformation of the wilderness itself, the exiles recognize that their liberation is a liberation due to the actions of God alone, for only God could so shape political events that they would be freed and could control nature so that the desert would bloom in celebration of their triumphal entry.

The events that had brought about this amazing liberation of the Jews had been mind-spinning. The Babylonian empire had conquered the little nation of Judah both in 597 and 586 BCE, finally stamping out all potential for rebellion by forcing all Israel's nobility, priestly caste and economic leaders into captivity in Babylon. Any who had the political, economic or religious power to pose a threat to Babylon and to advocate rebellion were clapped into chains and marched over 600 miles of sand to the city of Babylon where they became servants of the Babylonians. The only people left behind were the ordinary people who depended upon their Babylonian-appointed officials to order their existence. Thus, the powerful Jews lived under oppression while the Jews remaining behind in the land lived under exploitation and control.

And then, suddenly, everything changed. Cyrus, the king of the Medes and Persians took the city of Babylon by stealth, toppled the Babylonian rulers, and overnight annexed the Babylonian empire to the Median-Persian Empire. The story is dramatically told in the fifth chapter of Daniel with the famed "handwriting on the wall" of the words "Mene, mene, tekem, parsin" – "MENE, God has numbered the days of your kingdom and brought it to an end; TEKEM, you have been found weighed in the balance and found wanting; PERES, your kingdom is divided and given to the Medes and Persians" (Dan. 5:26-28).

Upon his accession to the throne of Babylon, the conquering Persian, Cyrus, declared all exiles to be free, and issued a decree that they could return under Persian protection to their own land.

Faced with such a profound liberation, how should the Israelite captives who had spent 70 years under house arrest in Babylon respond?

The command of God comes to them through Isaiah. “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” (vss. 3-4).

If there is any message that the authors of the book of Isaiah gave, it was the message, “Do not fear!” It is repeated again and again throughout the book (7:4; 8:12; 10:34; 37:6; 40:9; 41:10, 13; 43:1, 5; 44:2, 8; 51:7; 54:4, 14)! God is on the side of the weak, the poor, the powerless, the oppressed. Therefore, he is on Israel’s side when Israel is weak. Just as he was on their side when they followed Moses into the wilderness and out of Pharaoh’s domination, so God is now on their side as God uses Cyrus to set them free and return them to their promised land. And God is on the side of Israel, in this instance as in the previous instance, because God is always on the side of the poor!

So, in fear and uncertainty honed by 70 years living in bondage and under constant threat from the Babylonians, the band of timid Jews set forth to return to the Promised Land. They begin tentatively enough. But God wants them to trust in God, to not fear and to turn their timid retreat into a triumphant entry. Therefore, God acts to smooth the way for them through the desert and back to Israel. The prophet writes these inspiring words.

“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 (i.e., a fertile and fecund place), 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” (vss. 5-9).

God smoothes the way before God’s returning exiles. The infirmities that would make their return either a great difficulty or even an impossibility are suddenly taken from the people, so that they can see, hear, leap and sing! The desert through which they had trudged to Babylon in chains becomes a fruitful plain as they return. Abundance surrounds them and all that they need for the journey is provided to them through the fecundity of the land. They are protected both from wild men and wild beasts, so that they can travel in safety. Their way back home becomes a highway, smooth and free of rocks – a way so precious it is named “the Holy Way”. For the way back home again is a divine way, one that is ordered and maintained for the people by God!

Then Isaiah’s magnificent vision by which he ends his first book draws to its close. “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” (vss. 9b-10)!

The people will return with joy and their liberation will be complete because God will have acted, not only to free them from physical captivity and political oppression. He will have also “redeemed” and “ransomed” them. The words are very intentionally selected by Isaiah. Redemption was understood by the Israelites as being that act by which a kinsman would act to rescue a relative from economic ruin (cf. Ruth 4); thus, Isaiah is telling the reader that God was the “kinsman” who “redeemed” the Israelite captives from Babylonian exile. But God also “ransomed” them as well as “redeemed” them. Ransom was a sum of money paid to a captor to “buy back” a person who was in captivity.

These two Hebrew words often were placed in parallel with one another (e.g., Jer. 31:11; Hos. 13:14) in order to set forth the full redemptive work of God. They are not synonymous at all, because each presents its own nuance of God’s work of transformation. It is God who acts to “set free” (“redeem”) one who is helpless to redeem himself from economic debt. It is God who acts to “buy back” (“ransom”) those who are politically enslaved through captivity. The redemptive action is an economic action, while the ransoming action is a political action.

The selection of these words indicates Isaiah’s perception that God’s salvific work is not just spiritual but economic and political as well. God has redeemed and rescued (freed from economic exploitation, political oppression and spiritual domination) Israel from the Exodus, and God has now acted to do a comparable liberation from Babylonian exile (e.g., Isaiah 41:14; 49:26; 51:10-11). So, by the act of “redeeming” and “ransoming”, God has not only freed their bodies, their social dynamics and their personal enslavement, but God has “redeemed” and “ransomed” their souls, as well (44:22; Ps. 103:3-4). Thus, these words originally used exclusively for liberation from economic and political enslavement were now being transformed by Isaiah into spiritual words, so that the Israel freed from Babylonian domination was being set free to return to their Promised Land where they could embrace a new covenant with God. “For this is the new covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord”, for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity and shall remember their sin no more” (Jer. 31:33-34)!

Psalm 146 speaks of God’s commitment to bring about justice on the earth for those who are the powerless, the marginalized and the captive.

“Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the Lord their God, who keeps faith forever; who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The Lord sets the prisoners free. The Lord opens the eyes of the blind. The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down. The Lord loves the righteous. The Lord watches over the aliens. He upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (146:5, 6b-8).

This is a remarkable statement both because of its comprehensive sweep and its single focus. The essential question underlying this passage is, “For what ‘are those whose help is in the God of Jacob’ happy” (146:5)? Why should we be happy for being among the company that finds joy and fulfillment in God? The Psalmist answers that question this way:

“We should be happy because God keeps faithful with us; executes justice for the oppressed; feeds the hungry; sets prisoners free; heals the blind; lifts up the defeated; loves those who act justly; watches over strangers; and protects orphans and widows”!

God’s commitment to justice is unquestionably stated here. The list is surprisingly long and surprisingly comprehensive. God is concerned with the oppressed, the hungry, the prisoner, the blind, the defeated, those who need justice, the alien, the orphan and widow! It is crucial not to spiritualize this psalm, for to do so is to miss both its very essence and its punch! No one can honestly read this psalm and then insist that God’s chief desire is only for personal spiritual transformation. It is the politically powerless, the economically poor, the socially marginalized in society for whom God cares the most. These are the people with whom God deals. These are the ones whom God cares especially about. We should rejoice at such a priority on God’s part. Therefore, service of the poor and the powerless should become our priority, as well – if we perceive ourselves as people after God’s own heart!

Matthew 11:2-11 are two stories about John the baptizer and his relationship to Jesus. In the first, John was in prison and heard of the ministry Jesus was carrying out. Confused by Jesus’ actions, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” Jesus responds to John’s disciples, “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” (vss. 4-6).

This is a story of cognitive dissonance. John obviously has some deep reservations about the kind of ministry the Messiah, Jesus, is implementing. The reservations are deep enough that John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask him if he is, indeed, the Messiah or is he, like John, simply one preparing the way for the Messiah. Why would John so deeply doubt Jesus, the very one he acknowledged and baptized as the Messiah?

It was a matter of the Jewish community’s understanding of the mission and role of the Messiah. The Jews of Jesus’ day believed that the Messiah would come from God. But they also believed that the Messiah would be a conquering hero like the Messiah’s forefather David who would militarily defeat the Romans, permanently drive them out of the land of Israel, assume his rightful place as the king of Israel and heir-apparent of David, govern the politics, shape the economics and reform the priestly religion of Israel, and by so doing, return the nation to that of being the shalom community of political justice, economic equity and relational faith that God created it to be.

Obviously, this was the understanding of Messiah to which John the baptizer also held. He had uncritically embraced the beliefs of the people as his understanding of the mission and person of the Messiah, as well. It was this kind of warlike Messiah that he envisioned Jesus to be. And it was clear from Jesus’ ministry thus far that he was not conforming to John’s agenda for him!

In reality, the Old Testament presents an image of Messiah that is both conquering hero and suffering servant. Both elements are found in what is in reality a very nuanced presentation of the Messiah-figure, particularly by Isaiah. But the Jews, earlier living under Babylonian, Persian and then Greek captivity and now living under Roman oppression, had concentrated upon the victor image of Messiah while ignoring the suffering and ministering image of Isaiah. And John the baptizer had been no different than his contemporaries. He had expected Jesus to immediately begin fomenting rebellion, building an army and taking military action against Rome. And he wasn't seeing Jesus taking such actions. Could this mean, John wondered, that he had been mistaken about Jesus – that he was not the Messiah, after all? He had to find out.

Jesus' answer to the questioning of John is intriguing. He replies, "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" (vss. 4-6).

Jesus lets his deeds do the talking for him. He directs John's disciples to observe how he is conducting his ministry, as he heals the blind, lame, lepers and the deaf, he raises the dead to life again, and as he proclaims liberating news to the poor – news about both the potential of them having a right relationship with God and their liberation from the political, economic and religious powers that oppress them. "And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me".

What is particularly significant about Jesus' defense, however, is not simply his exhibition of his works of healing, renewal of life and transformation. What Jesus actually did in speaking these words was to use the words of Isaiah to redirect John's understanding of the authentic work of the Messiah. In supporting his ministry, he uses Isaiah 26:19; 29:18-19; 35:5-6; 42:7 and 61:1 to summarize his ministry and thus to remind John that there is another image of Messiah in the Old Testament scriptures than the one that John was choosing to embrace. The Messiah was to be one who was sent by God to "bring sight to the blind, make the lame walk, cleanse the lepers, bring hearing to the deaf, raise the dead, and proclaim good news to the poor". This is precisely what Jesus is doing. And, consequently, if this be Jesus' work of Messiahship, then this means that his work is also that of being marginalized by the powers, oppressed by them, and eventually suffering and dying for the liberation of humanity. "This", Jesus is proclaiming to John, "is the kind of Messiah God has called me to be. And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me!"

Jesus, having been so roundly doubted (and therefore, implicitly criticized) by John then does an amazingly gracious thing. He turns to the crowd and asks, "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 Baptizer; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he" (vss. 7-11).

Having been so deeply doubted by John, Jesus acts to affirm and commend John's role in Israel's life, and thus to communicate to John that he is not offended at John's questioning of him. In the most striking language, Jesus commends John and John's ministry before the crowd.

Jesus first commends John for not being of the elite. He asked the question, “What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind?” The reed was the symbol of the Herodian monarchy, given to it by Rome. Jesus continues, “What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes?” The only people who could “dress in soft robes” were those who could afford such expensive material – that is the politically or the economically powerful. “Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces!”

So what Jesus is saying here is, “You went into the wilderness to hear what you believed was the words of life, words calling Israel to reform and renewal. And from whom did these words come? Did they come from the Herodian monarchy, from powerful priests or from our richest citizens, members of the elite? Not at all. Such members of the elite don’t go out to wildernesses to proclaim what they perceive as good news (which of course, only benefits them). They belong in palaces! What, then, did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet.”

John is “more than a prophet” because he is the one who was chosen by God to be God’s messenger who would announce the coming of the Messiah. Jesus quotes Malachi 3:1 (“See, I am sending my messenger to prepare the way before me”). And to that mission, John had been faithful. John had not been disobedient to the heavenly vision but instead had faithfully carried out the mission God had given to him to proclaim the coming of the Messiah. And that faithfulness on John’s part has now brought him to the prison of that “reed shaken by the wind”, Herod, and his eventual waffling that will bring about John’s death. Therefore, “truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptizer”!

But then Jesus’ words of the deepest commendation of John and his ministry turn, so that they move beyond simple commendation but call those who are presently listening to accountability. “Yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he”. What did Jesus mean by this? He simply meant that John was great because he had been obedient to God’s call to him and had faithfully carried out that call. God calls us to faithfulness, not to success. And John, above all, had been faithful.

But he did not understand. He did not truly believe. Although he had the clarity of earlier seeing and thus believing that Jesus was the one appointed by God to be the Messiah, he did not understand what being Messiah was all about. John had accepted the lie told both by the leaders of Israel and by the people that Messiah was to be a conquering hero. He was not discerning of God’s true intent for Israel and for the world. He had believed what had been told to him without dealing with what he had to know were oppositional passages in scripture that presented Messiah, not as conqueror but as suffering servant.

John never asked why both Israel’s leaders and the people would cling to an interpretation of Messiah that promised conquest and dominance rather than the alternate image of scripture of Messiah as servant and redeemer. He never discerned that such a conquering image strengthened the position of the powerful who proclaimed it, because it diverted the attention of the people away from the leaders’ actions of dominance and toward the fulfillment of a dream in the distant future. He never saw that such an image acted as an opiate to the ordinary people

who embraced it, enabling them to be accepting of rather than seeking to change their vulnerable lot in life while waiting for a distant reward.

Therefore, in a most profound sense, “the least in the kingdom of heaven”, those who discerned the true calling of Messiah as the one who is committed to the poor and who provides ways that enable them to work for their own transformation of their situation – and who is willing to suffer and even die as the inevitable outcome of working for the people’s empowerment and thus opposing the powerful -- “are greater than he”. Those who can embrace the Messiah as the one who brings sight to the blind, walking to the lame, cleansing of lepers, hearing to the deaf, new life to the dead, and good news to the poor – and thus liberating them to become all that God created them to be, understand the kingdom of heaven and God’s work in the world through Jesus in a way that John the baptizer can never understand. Therefore, they are greater than he because they are more spiritually discerning than he and consequently have a greater commitment to working for the transformation of the world into “the kingdom of our Lord and of his Christ”.

James 5:7-10 is the epistle lesson for the 3rd Sunday of Advent. All four scriptures – the Gospel and Old Testament lessons and the Psalm as well as the epistle lesson – all deal with the themes of God’s coming action and the necessity for God’s people to live in patience as well as hope. In the Old Testament lesson, God’s action will be that of setting God’s captive people free from their Babylonian exile through God’s intervention in history through the military genius of Cyrus, king of Persia. The prophet urges Judah’s captives to both hope for and anticipate this act of liberation (even though it seems perfectly incongruous for it to happen), and also to be patient in waiting for that action, for it is not yet time. The Psalm reminds the reader of God’s commitment to justice and suggests that we should be patient in working for justice, as well. The Gospel lesson tells of John’s losing of heart over Jesus’ actions, for Jesus is not acting in the way John anticipated the Messiah should act when he begins his mission on earth. Because of that cognitive dissonance, John is both losing hope and patience. But God knows what God is about. So Jesus redefines for John the baptizer’s understanding of the work of the Messiah and declares “Blessed is he who takes no offense at me”!

The themes of God’s action and the consequent need of the church not to lose hope but to practice patience are also the themes of today’s epistle lesson. “Be patient, therefore, beloved,” James instructs the church, “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 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” (5:7-10).

The issue with which these Christians to whom James is writing is different than was the issue of John the baptizer or the Jewish exiles in Babylon. The issue with John was, “Why isn’t Jesus acting out his Messiahship in the way I understand scripture and tradition declare that the Messiah should act?” For the Jewish exiles reflected in both the Old Testament lesson and the Psalm for today, the issue was “Will we ever get free of Babylon and be released from captivity

and servitude?” The issue for this Christian church is, “Why hasn’t Jesus returned to set up his kingdom? Why is it taking so long?”

Besides urging them to be patient, James uses an intriguing illustration to enable them to understand that God’s timing is not our timing! He writes, “The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains”. The “early and the late rains” are spoken of quite often in scripture (e.g., Deut. 11:14; Jer. 5:24; Joel 2:23), invariably used as a metaphor for patience. These two rainy seasons were absolutely essential for a Judean farmer to have an abundant harvest. The early rains occurred in late October and early November after the farmer had sown his seed. Without that rain, the seeds would not germinate and the crop would fail. The latter rains occurred in April and May; without that rain, no crop would mature *no matter how successful the early rains had been!* In other words, what the illustration is declaring is that there are some things in life that can’t be hurried up. In order to have happen what one wants to have happen, both adequate time must be given for the event’s germination and maturation, and the process proven to work must be allowed to do its work! Some things simply can’t be hurried up to fit the impatience of human beings, who always want it yesterday!

Thus, what James is saying to this Christian Church is this: “You pray, “God’s kingdom come”. And you want it to come right now. But God knows what God is about. God knows the complexity, the depth and the breadth of the work that must be done for the world to become God’s community of shalom. Only God fully understands those who need to be won to Christ, the changes that must occur in the political, economic and religious systems, the embrace of justice and equitable sharing of wealth and the shaping of a culture in which people truly “love each other tenderly and walk humbly with their God”. So learn to maintain hope that God is at work in the transformation of the world, discern what you need to be doing to contribute to that transformation, and be patient with the time that it will take for this work to be completed. It took millions of years for human beings to get into the mess that they are in; why should it not take millions of years to get them out of it!”

James then gives to the Christians both an instruction and an example. The instruction is “Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged”. The example is “Take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord as an example of patience”. If one considers Moses as the first of the prophets, then the prophets have been calling God’s people to be about sharing in the work of the coming of God’s kingdom for the past 1200 years, James is declaring to these Christians (and today, it would be 3200 years). And it hasn’t come yet! If these greatest of the Old Testament worthies can wait for such a long time for God’s completion of the redemptive and liberating work that God is doing in the world, why can’t you? So, don’t grumble; don’t criticize; don’t declare, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another”? Instead, get about the mission to which God has called you. Be faithful in doing your part in the work God is doing to culminate in Christ returning to rule the world. And when you live your life that way, then you will be speeding the day when Christ will return and humanity will become all that God created humanity and their society to be!