

LECTIONARY DEVOTIONS (Year A)



Weekly Reflections for the Christian Year

Lectionary Devotions:
Weekly Reflections for the Christian Year

Year A

By Paxson Jeancake

Preface

Over the years I have become quite a fan of Johann Sebastian Bach. I deeply enjoy listening to his cantatas and discovering the inspiration behind the music and the text. When Bach moved to Leipzig, Germany in 1723 and took his position as Thomascantor (with responsibilities at the St. Thomas School and the four city churches), he channeled his energy into writing a cantata a week based on the Lutheran lectionary of his day. He kept up this weekly pace of writing lectionary-based cantatas for several years (1723-1725). His goal was to create “a well-regulated church music to the glory of God.” Gardiner writes:

For, from the moment of his official induction as Thomascantor in Leipzig in the early summer of 1723 Bach set off at a pace of weekly church cantata composition so furious that probably no one - not even he, with his extraordinary reserves of creative energy and powers of concentration - could sustain it for more than a couple of years (as indeed he didn't)... Such zeal went far beyond any contractual obligation to compose and perform music to adorn the liturgy of the Lutheran church.¹

The sheer volume of Bach’s creative output is astonishing. The wealth of expression he has left for the church and the world is a gift, and it evokes a sense of admiration and respect in me as a worship leader and songwriter. I feel a kindred spirit with Bach, and his influence sparked a desire in me to create an ordered and comprehensive resource for the church based on the lectionary of my day.

In addition to Bach, I have been greatly influenced by Russell Mitman and his book, *Worship in the Shape of Scripture*. Mitman’s basic paradigm is “from lectionary to liturgy.” Mitman encourages those involved in worship planning to create an “organic liturgy” that flows from the themes and language of Scripture.² At a time when biblical literacy is on the decline and the presence of Scripture in our worship services is low, Mitman’s paradigm appeared as a timely remedy to these unfortunate situations.

Inspired by both Bach and Mitman, I began to write songs and a weekly blog, offering lectionary-based resources for pastors and worship leaders. This book and other endeavors are the fruit of that inspiration.³

Because the content of this resource is based on the Revised Common Lectionary (RCL), it will be of great benefit to you to understand its structure and purpose. A lectionary is simply a collection of readings or selections from the Scriptures, arranged and intended for proclamation during the worship of the people of God.⁴

The RCL was first published in 1992 and contains readings for the Sundays and major festivals over a three-year cycle (Year A, Year B, Year C). The RCL has its roots in Jewish lectionary systems and in early Christian practice. Among our earliest lectionaries are the lists of readings for Holy Week and Easter in fourth-century Jerusalem.⁵

For each Sunday and for special days in the Christian Year, the RCL assigns a group of four readings: an Old Testament reading (first reading), followed by a psalm of response; a reading from one of the New Testament epistles (second reading); and a Gospel reading. The

¹ Gardiner, *Bach*, 288-289.

² Mitman, *Worship*, 33.

³ *You Keep Hope Alive* is the first collection of songs for the Lectionary Journey. It is available on various music platforms.

⁴ CCT, *Revised Common Lectionary*, 185.

⁵ Green, *Connections*, xv

RCL's three-year cycle centers Year A in Matthew, Year B in Mark, and Year C in Luke. The Gospel of John is woven throughout the three-year cycle.

Even though it is the last reading, the Gospel reading is the primary or governing text; it is the "hermeneutical key" to understanding the relationship of the other readings. From the First Sunday of Advent to Trinity Sunday of each year, the Old Testament reading is chosen to complement the Gospel reading of the day. The Psalm is a response to the first reading and follows its themes. The Epistle is also related to the Gospel reading and gives us insights into the faith and struggles of the early Christian communities.⁶

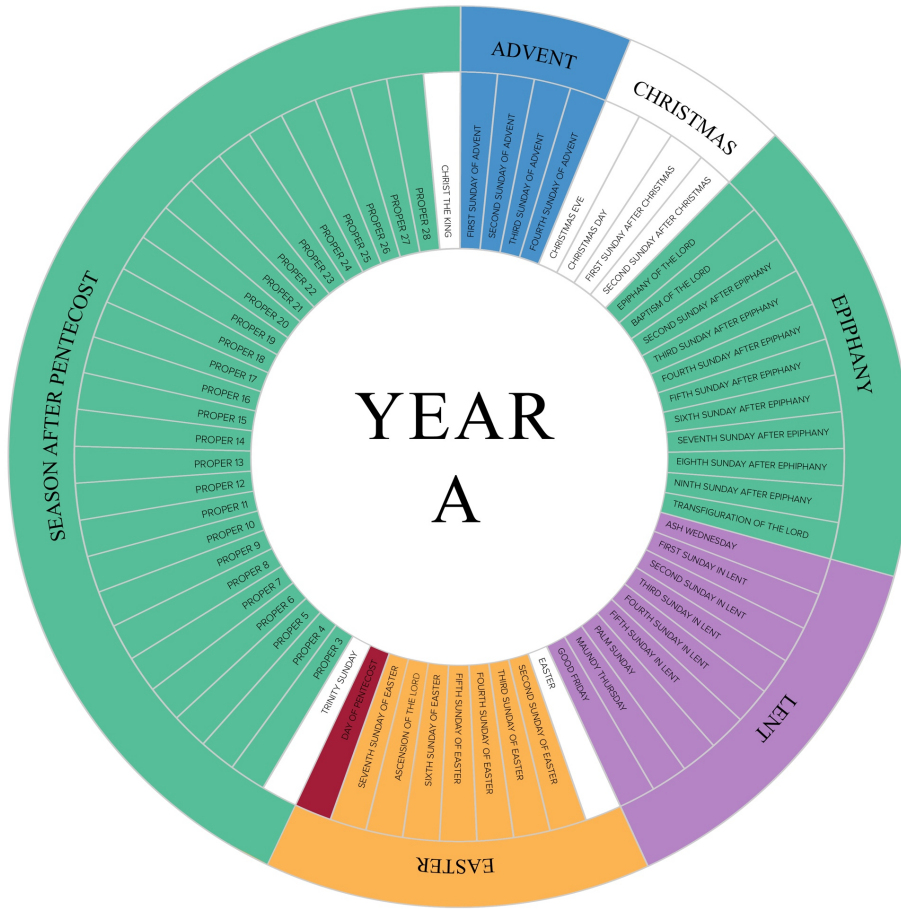
For the Season after Pentecost, the RCL offers two patterns of readings: the complementary track and the semi-continuous track.⁷ Each of these tracks uses the same Epistle and Gospel readings, but the Old Testament and Psalm readings are different. In the complementary track, the Old Testament readings are related to the Gospel reading of the day. In the semi-continuous pattern, the emphasis is on reading through an Old Testament book. In both cases, the psalm is chosen as a response to the Old Testament reading.⁸ Each new cycle in the RCL begins on the First Sunday of Advent and ends on Christ the King.

The RCL offers a steady diet of Scripture from the Old and New Testaments, follows the cycles and seasons of the Christian Year, and forms us spiritually as we regularly feast on God's word. The goal of this project is to provide Scripture-based worship aids, songs, and devotions for each Sunday in the Christian Year over the three-year lectionary cycle. It is my hope that these resources will be helpful for those involved in planning various elements of corporate worship; however, they can also benefit anyone interested in following a regular pattern of Scripture readings for worship and devotion.

⁶ Green, *Connections*, xv

⁷ *Lectionary Journey* follows the complementary track.

⁸ Long, *Feasting on the Word*, xi.



Advent through Epiphany (Year A)

First Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 2:1-5

Psalm 122

Romans 13:11-14

Matthew 24:36-44

Devotion

In the readings for this Sunday, the first Sunday of Advent, we hear of a time of peace through the prophet Isaiah. The apostle Paul calls us to live wide awake as we anticipate the Lord's return. Jesus also teaches us to be awake and alert for we do not know the day or hour of his return. Thus, anticipation of Christ's second coming is a common theme in the readings.

Each year, the first Sunday of Advent highlights Christ's second coming, his second advent. The first reading from Isaiah 2 describes a time when nations will flock to the mountain of the Lord. Isaiah describes a time of profound peace. He writes,

“He shall judge between the nations,
and shall arbitrate for many peoples;
they shall beat their swords into plowshares,
and their spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more” (Isaiah 2:4).

In this description, the nations are at peace with one another. Weapons for war are transformed into farming tools. Isaiah is describing a time in the future, a time when the kingdom of God will be made manifest in a powerful way. We live now in anticipation of that day, in the “already and not yet” of the kingdom. We do not experience the profound peace of the fullness of God's kingdom, but one day we will. For now, we live each day as instruments of God's peace, making choices that bring his light into this dark world. We live today as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation.

Psalm 122 is an appropriate psalm of response for it calls us to pray for peace. The psalmist sings,

“Pray for the peace of Jerusalem:
‘May they prosper who love you.
Peace be within your walls,
and security within your towers.’
For the sake of my relatives and friends
I will say, ‘Peace be within you.’
For the sake of the house of the Lord our God,
I will seek your good” (Psalm 122:6-9).

The psalmist is singing about peace within Jerusalem. As New Testament believers, we pray for peace around the world as God's kingdom goes forth powerfully in word and deed. As we enter the Advent season, we should ask how we are living today as instruments of God's peace in the world. Do we pray regularly for our city, our country, and our world? Do we intercede on behalf of world leaders; for nations in conflict; and for struggles within our families, neighborhoods, schools, and our local church? Advent calls us to be people of prayer, praying for the peace of God's kingdom to be made manifest among us.

The second reading from Romans 13 is a wake-up call from the apostle Paul. Because the Lord's return could be drawing near, Paul writes,

“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” (Romans 13:12-14).

Paul is calling us to live as if the Lord could return tomorrow. He admonishes us to live honorably, not indulging ourselves in various forms of sin and self-pleasure, but to clothe ourselves in the Lord Jesus Christ. Over and over in his epistles, Paul uses the language of stripping off the old self and clothing ourselves in the new self; laying aside the old and putting on the Lord Jesus Christ.

Too often, we forget our new identity, that we are a new creation in Christ. We are no longer slaves to our former way of life, a life of sin and self-gratification. During Advent, we are reminded to live in light of our Lord's return; we are reminded to live in light of our true identity as sons and daughters of the King.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 24, Jesus teaches that the day and hour of his return will come at an unexpected time, like the flood during Noah's day. People were eating and drinking and had no idea that judgment was about to come upon them. Thus, Jesus exhorts us to be ready and alert. He teaches,

“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” (Matthew 24:42-44).

The admonition to us is clear. Live today as if Jesus could return tomorrow. The exhortation is the same as that of Paul, live wide awake! During the season of Advent, we anticipate the return and judgment of Christ. As believers, we do not need to fear the Lord's return; however, it should inform the way we live. It is all too easy for us to fall into a sense of complacency, to forget all about the second coming of Christ and live as if his return is in the distant future. This would be unwise.

Advent calls us to a sense of urgency and preparation. May we live wide awake, praying for God's kingdom peace and living as Christ's ambassadors of reconciliation. During this season of Advent and throughout the year, may we bring the light of Christ into the darkness of our world.

Questions for Reflection

1. What kind of language does Isaiah use to describe a time of peace in the future? How are we to live as instruments of God's peace in the world?
2. For what does the psalmist call us to pray as God's people? Do you intercede for your community, city, nation, and for the world? How can you begin to incorporate a rhythm of intercessory prayer into your life?
3. Paul calls us to come awake as the day of Christ's return draws near. What admonitions does Paul give us in Romans 13 that demonstrate what wide-awake living looks like? What is the connection between personal ethics and the reality of Christ's return?
4. Jesus tells us that the day and hour of his return is unknown. Like Paul, he exhorts us to be alert and ready. Have you become complacent in your walk, or do you live with a healthy sense of urgency regarding the day of the Lord? Why does Jesus refer to the days of Noah? How is that relevant to us? How would you live differently today if you knew Christ would come back tomorrow?

Prayer of Response

Based on Matthew 24:36-37, 44

Lord Jesus,
we do not know the day or hour of your return.
Keep us awake and ready,
for your coming will be unexpected.
Help us to lay aside the works of darkness
and put on the armor of light.
By your grace, may we live honorably,
making no provision for sinful desires.
And fill us with hope, even as we pray,
"Come, Lord Jesus; come, Emmanuel." Amen.

Second Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 11:1-10

Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19

Romans 15:4-13

Matthew 3:1-12

Devotion

In the readings for this Sunday, we find John the Baptist in the wilderness proclaiming, “Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.” Isaiah prophesies of the root of Jesse who will rule with justice and usher in the peaceable kingdom. The apostle Paul speaks of Christ as the one who confirms the promises given to the patriarchs and the one who is the hope of the Gentiles. Thus, the themes of hope in Christ, justice, and the root of Jesse are common threads throughout the readings.

In the first reading we hear of “the root of Jesse,” the one who will come from the line of David to rule and reign. Isaiah proclaims,

“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” (Isaiah 11:1-2).

This ruler will be filled with wisdom and might, and he will have a heart for the marginalized of society for “with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth” (Isaiah 11:4). This coming ruler will not favor the rich and powerful, but will bring justice to the oppressed.

Isaiah also describes the peace and harmony that this coming king will bring. He writes,

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” (Isaiah 11:6-7).

This description should astound and amaze us and fill us with hope. This coming king will bring harmony and restoration, not only to humanity, but to all of creation. This ruler will bring about the redemption for which creation has been longing (Romans 8:19-21).

Psalm 72 is a fitting response to the first reading. Like the ruler in Isaiah 11, the psalmist prays to God, asking for a King who would judge “with righteousness” and “with justice” (Psalm 72:2). Also like Isaiah 11, the psalmist prays for righteousness to flourish and for peace to abound under this King. The psalmist is acting as an intercessor for his people as he pours out his heart to God. We all, like the psalmist, long for justice, righteousness, and peace. May our prayers be full of these kinds of petitions, that the kingdom of God would come today in power.

In the second reading, the apostle Paul desires for God’s Word to bring instruction, encouragement, and hope to God’s people. Paul desires unity among the believers so that Christ will be glorified among all peoples of the earth. Paul uses Isaiah’s imagery of Christ as the “root of Jesse” in whom “the Gentiles shall hope” (Romans 15:12). Indeed, hope is a key theme for Paul in this passage. Paul uses the word twice in his closing prayer that the “God of hope” would fill us with joy and peace and that our hope would abound by “the power of the Holy Spirit” (Romans 15:13). We recognize that, ultimately, hope is a gift from God.

Finally, in the Gospel we read about John the Baptist - the voice in the wilderness calling God’s people to repentance for “the kingdom of heaven has come near” (Matthew 3:2). John prophesies about Jesus and prepares the way for the one who will come after him, who is more powerful than him. He declares,

“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” (Matthew 3:11-12).

John describes the ministry of Jesus, a ministry that divides the righteous from the unrighteous, the insiders from the outsiders, and those who think they know God from those who humbly know him by faith. Matthew lets us know that John and his message were prophesied by the prophet Isaiah. Many were coming to John, confessing their sins and receiving a baptism of repentance. When the Pharisees and Sadducees arrive, John rebukes them for their righteous arrogance. He speaks of the coming one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire.

We should take these words to heart and let them convict us of any sense of self-righteousness or superiority. If we know Jesus by faith, we should be grateful that his grace and mercy softened our hard hearts that we would repent and believe that he is our Savior and Lord.

As we reflect on the imagery and truth of these readings, we can find great hope. First, we can place our hope in the fact that God keeps his promises. All of his prophesies will one day be fulfilled. Some of them have already come true. The prophesies of Isaiah and John the Baptist have been fulfilled: the root of Jesse has appeared as Jesus was born from the line of David and on the day of Pentecost, Jesus baptized his church with the promised Holy Spirit. Indeed, everyone who places his or her faith in Jesus Christ receives the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Second, we can find hope in the peaceable kingdom, the day when all of creation will be restored. Isaiah’s prophecy of a kingdom that is characterized by peace and harmony should bring us hope. In the midst of the trials, the discord, and the injustice of our current circumstances, we can live expectantly, anticipating the day of ultimate restoration when Jesus returns.

Third, we can rest in the God of hope himself and the promised hope that will abound through the power of the Holy Spirit who dwells within us. Ultimately, our hope is the gift of a

gracious, loving, and merciful God who knows our every need. May these promises fill us with hope during this Advent season.

Questions for Reflection

1. How does the ancient prophecy and imagery of “the root of Jesse” bring you hope and comfort today? Describe the imagery of the peaceable kingdom (Isaiah 11:6-9). What all is God going to renew and restore in the new heaven and the new earth? Do you long for this coming kingdom, its peace and harmony? Explain.
2. The psalmist acted as an intercessor for his people, praying for justice and peace. Do you regularly intercede and pray for the presence and power of God’s kingdom to come in our world, our country, our churches, homes, and families?
3. Paul talks about hope in Romans 15. How would you define the word hope? Has your understanding of hope been enriched by the passages you read today? Explain.
4. Describe the ministry and baptism of John the Baptist. How did he prepare the way for Jesus? Describe the ministry and baptism of Jesus. What is the meaning of the wheat and the chaff in Matthew 13:12? If you are a believer, how do you live differently today because Jesus has baptized you with the Holy Spirit and fire (Matthew 13:11)?

Prayer of Response

Based on Isaiah 11:1-2, 4, 6-7, 9; Matthew 3:1-3

Lord Jesus,
you are the Root of Jesse upon whom rests
the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might.
You judge the meek and the poor with righteousness and equality.
As it was prophesied, John came as a voice in the wilderness,
calling us to repentance for your kingdom is near.
We long for the fullness of this peaceable kingdom,
when the wolf shall live with the lamb,
and the cub and the calf shall lie down together.
We place our hope in your promises and look forward to the day
when the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord.
In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Third Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Lectionary Readings

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

Devotion

In the readings for this Sunday, we hear Isaiah's prophecy of transformation. In the Gospel reading, Jesus quotes from this same passage to assure John the Baptist that he is the Messiah. James calls us to be patient as we await the Lord's return. These are themes for the Third Sunday of Advent.

In the first reading from Isaiah 35, the prophet describes the coming of God's kingdom and the restoration that will take place. He writes,

“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” (Isaiah 35:5-7).

The coming of the Lord's kingdom will bring healing and wholeness to those who suffer. The blind shall see, the lame shall walk, and the deaf shall hear. Moreover, creation itself will be transformed and renewed. The dry and thirsty ground shall become “springs of water.” Such imagery paints a picture of the redeeming effect that Christ brings to the world.

Psalm 146 echoes this same picture of restoration. The psalmist sings,

“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 strangers;
he upholds the orphan and the widow,
but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin” (Psalm 146:7-9).

The theme of physical restoration is prevalent throughout the Scriptures. Jesus came to seek and to save the lost, and he came to heal all that is broken in our world. All of creation has

felt the devastating effects of the Fall. Jesus came to redeem the world from death and decay. Indeed, the book of Revelation tells us that he is “making all things new” (Revelation 21:5). His work of redemption, prophesied in the Old Testament, has begun in his first advent, his first arrival as the child born in Bethlehem. When Jesus put on flesh and walked among us, his ministry of restoration began and his kingdom was inaugurated.

In the second reading from James 5, we are exhorted to be patient as we wait for the Lord to return. James writes,

“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” (James 5:7-9).

James, Jesus’ brother, speaks a word of admonition and calls us to exercise patience as we anticipate the Lord’s return. He compares such waiting to that of a farmer, waiting for the earth to water the earth. James also calls us to strengthen our hearts as we wait. How does one strengthen his or her heart? Certainly, spending regular time in God’s Word and in prayer, participating each Sunday in corporate worship, building relationships with other Christians, sharing the gospel with friends and neighbors, and serving those in need are all various ways that we strengthen our hearts and our souls. Some of these practices are referred to as “means of grace” because they feed and nourish our faith; they sustain us in our spiritual journey with Christ as we wait for his return.

Lastly, James offers the exhortation not to grumble with one another. His epistle is filled with much practical wisdom, as exemplified in this simple but profound admonition. How often do we grumble, gossip, and complain with about one another? In the context of patiently waiting for Christ’s return, James encourages us to love and be patient with one another. May we heed this exhortation during this Advent season and throughout our lives.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 11, we find John the Baptist sending two of his disciples to question Jesus to make sure that he is truly the Messiah. Jesus sends the disciples back with this response,

“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” (Matthew 11:4-6).

Jesus wants to assure John that he is the one for whom they have been waiting. Using the imagery of Isaiah 35 (the first reading), Jesus describes the healing and restoration that are taking place as his kingdom draws near. The brokenness of the world is being redeemed and restored because the King, the Messiah has come.

Jesus has commissioned us to bring gospel restoration to those in need. By the power of the Word and Spirit, God’s healing power reaches those who need physical and spiritual healing. We are the hands and feet of Jesus in this world, sharing the good news of the gospel in word and in deed with our neighbors, our friends, and our families. During this Advent season, may we see brokenness restored and lives transformed even as we await the coming of our King.

Questions for Reflection

1. Describe the scope of restoration portrayed in Isaiah 35:1-10. When should we expect this transformation to take place? Do you see this kind of restoration in your own life?
2. Psalm 146 echoes many of the themes in Isaiah 35. Reread Psalm 146:7-9. Can you relate to one of the specific types of restoration mentioned by the psalmist? Explain.
3. James call us to patiently wait for the Lord's return. Do you struggle with waiting on the Lord's timing in your life? What types of practices help to strengthen our hearts (James 5:8)? Are any of these practices part of the regular rhythm of your day and week? Do you ever indulge in grumbling with others? What might be a more edifying and God-honoring practice?
4. John the Baptist doubted if Jesus was truly the long-awaited Messiah. Do you ever doubt your faith? Do ever wonder if Jesus is actually present and working in your life? Explain.

Prayer of Response

Based on James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-6

Lord Jesus,
give us patience as we wait for your return.
Like John, sometimes we doubt and wonder if your promises are true.
Strengthen our hearts and reassure us for
the blind receive their sight, the lame walk,
the sick are healed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised,
and the poor have good news brought to them.
By your grace, help us not to grumble against one another,
but take the prophets, who spoke in the name of the Lord,
as examples of suffering and patience.
In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Fourth Sunday of Advent (Year A)

Lectionary Readings

Isaiah 7:10-16

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19

Romans 1:1-7

Matthew 1:18-25

Devotion

In the readings for this Sunday, the prophet Isaiah speaks of a young woman who will give birth to a son, whose name shall be Immanuel. In the Gospel reading from Matthew 1, Joseph has a dream revealing that Mary's child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit. It is also declared that his name shall be Immanuel, fulfilling Isaiah's prophecy. The apostle Paul articulates the gospel message in the opening of his letter to the Romans. Thus, the good news that God is with us is the common thread in the readings for the Fourth Sunday of Advent.

In the first reading from Isaiah 7, the prophet announces that a "young woman" or "virgin woman" will give birth to a son. The context is that King Ahaz is fearful of being invaded, and the Lord gives him a sign. Isaiah declares, "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" (Isaiah 7:14).

We see the fulfillment of this prophecy in the birth of Jesus. Jesus is our Immanuel; he is God with us. This is the good news of the gospel. Our God is not distant or aloof. He took on flesh and walked among us. Even now, he is still present and with us through the indwelling Holy Spirit. During Advent, we remember Jesus' first coming and we anticipate his second coming. At Christmas, we celebrate the reality of the incarnation, the powerful truth that God came down from heaven to dwell with his people and to inaugurate his kingdom on earth.

Psalm 80 is a fitting response as the psalmist pleads that God would come to save his people. The psalmist sings,

"Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,
you who lead Joseph like a flock!
You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth
before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.
Stir up your might, and come to save us" (Psalm 80:1-2).

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we embrace the answer to this plea as we remember the promise of Immanuel, that God is with us and that he did come to save us. God will never leave or forsake his people. He loves us so much that he came to earth to redeem and restore all that was broken and in need of salvation. Jesus, our Good Shepherd came to tend to his flock. One day he will gather his flock together from every tribe and tongue. We will all dwell together in the new heavens and the new earth. Until that time, we wait patiently for his return and serve as his ambassadors on earth.

In the second reading from Romans 1, the apostle Paul articulates the breadth of the gospel in one long sentence. The reality of the incarnation is declared within the third verse. Paul writes,

“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” (Romans 1:1-4).

Paul describes the gospel concerning God’s Son, “who was descended from David according to the flesh” (Romans 1:3). This reference is about the incarnation, of Immanuel, of God taking on flesh and walking among us. Paul moves quickly from the incarnation to the resurrection as he shares the gospel succinctly with the Romans. This is significant for us as we reflect on the purpose of God coming to his people. His took on flesh to become one of us, to die on the cross to atone for our sins, and to rise from the dead to bring us new life. Our Lord came to this earth to defeat the power of death and to open for us the way to eternal life.

In the Gospel reading from Matthew 1, Joseph encounters an angel of the Lord in a dream. As he is considering how to separate from Mary (who was pregnant) without disgracing her, he is given these words,

“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.”

Then Matthew adds this commentary, “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” (Matthew 1:20-23).

Matthew’s gospel centers on Joseph while Luke recounts the story of an angel visiting Mary (Luke 1:26-38). Together, Matthew and Luke paint a full picture of the annunciation of Jesus’ birth. Matthew gives us a window into Joseph’s experience; Luke gives us a window into Mary’s experience. Both accounts, however, reveal the promise of one who shall be called Jesus, which means, “God saves.” Matthew adds the promise from Isaiah 7 that he shall be called Immanuel, “God is with us.”

The good news of the gospel is that, in Jesus, God is with us and God has come to save us. Names are significant, and the names given to our Savior tell us much about his divine mission. During this Advent season, we can embrace the name of Jesus. We know that our Lord came to save his people. He came to defeat the power of death and bring us new life. He has come to redeem and restore us and all of creation.

We also know that he is Immanuel. He is with us and has experienced all that we experience on earth: all the trials, all the sorrows, all the joy, and all the pain. On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we rest in who God is and what he has done for us.

Questions for Reflection

1. In the Old Testament, Isaiah declared the promise of Immanuel to King Ahaz. How has that promise been fulfilled in the New Testament? Does the fulfillment of Old Testament promises help you trust in the authority of God's Word? Explain.
2. The psalmist pleads for God to save his people (Psalm 80:2). How did Jesus fulfill this plea? There is a refrain in Psalm 80 (Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved). How is this refrain particularly appropriate during this season?
3. Paul packs a lot of theology into Romans 1. What are the major truths that he highlights? Why is the incarnation such a vital aspect of our redemption? How would you share the gospel in one sentence with a nonbeliever?
4. Have you considered how the Scriptures offer us two windows into the annunciation of Jesus' birth: Joseph's experience and Mary's experience. What divine message and guidance did Joseph need to hear? How does God guide us today?

Prayer of Response

Based on Matthew 1:21-23

Lord Jesus,
we thank you for coming to us,
and for saving us from our sins.
During this Advent season,
we stand in awe and wonder
of the fulfillment of your gospel promise:
the virgin shall conceive and bear a son,
and they shall name him Emmanuel,
which means, God is with us.
Help us to walk in faith,
knowing your mighty presence is among us.
In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.