

Third Sunday of Advent
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Isaiah 35:1-10

This chapter belongs with the so-called “Second Isaiah” (chapters 40-55), written during the exile of the Jews in Babylon (596-539). The image of a highway in the desert for the exiles to use in their return to Jerusalem is also to be found in Isaiah 40:3-4 and 42:16. God’s redemption of Israel from exile will be marked with the miraculous creation of a level road across the Arabian Desert from Babylon to Jerusalem.

Psalm 146:4-9

The *hymns* Psalms 146-150 each begin with the expression *hallelu-jah!* (“Praise the LORD!”) and may derive from a collection of such hymns. Hymns typically celebrate the presence of the LORD in the Temple and ordinarily focus upon some aspect of God’s power and goodness. Psalm 146 focuses upon God’s defense of the poor and disenfranchised. In the omitted verses 1-3 (Hebrew 1-4), the psalm enjoins the congregation not to trust rulers or any other human being for salvation since those leaders too return to the dust.

or

Canticle 3 or Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55)

By the fifth century of our era, monks had appended fourteen songs to the Greek Book of Psalms, some from scripture like today’s canticle and some from elsewhere, to use in monastic liturgies. This addition they called simply “Canticles.” Many interpreters believe this *hymn* in Luke’s Gospel derives from a psalm otherwise unknown to us. The Psalm Scroll from Qumran’s 11th cave informs us that David composed 4040 psalms of which our Psalter contains only a few (150). In the time of Jesus, Jews used many additional hymns, and this hymn Luke chose as a way to express Mary’s response to the angel’s news of her selection to be mother of the Christ.

James 5:7-10

This epistle is a late first-century writing of uncertain authorship. The reference in today’s passage to the “early and late” rains (5:7) has led some to suggest that the epistle was written in Syria or Palestine where the late October and late April rains are essential to agriculture. “Patience” in the Hebrew Bible is ordinarily an attribute of God rather than of human beings, so the readers are encouraged to develop this aspect of the divine character, and the suffering (5:10) which calls for this patience is most likely not the suffering of persecution but the ordinary sufferings of a human life.

Matthew 11:2-11

In first-century Judaism those who believed in the advent of a messianic king often also believed that Elijah would appear just before this king’s advent. They believed this because scripture told them that Elijah has ascended into heaven (2 Kings 2:11-12) without tasting death. As a consequence they came to believe that the same prophet would return in bodily form to announce the Messiah’s coming. Matthew’s Gospel takes special pains to put John the Baptist in the role of Elijah as a way of showing how Jesus’ life and ministry fulfilled all of Israel’s messianic hopes.

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