

The First Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle C RCL

Isaiah 43:1–7

Our reading contains two of the five passages (Isaiah 41:8-13; 14-16; 43:1-4, 5-7; 44:1-5) in the Second Isaiah that we have learned to call “oracles of salvation,” following the terminology of J. Begrich (1934). In theory, the oracle of salvation would be part of a liturgy of lament in which the priest assures the supplicant of God’s eventual salvation. Recent research has focused less on the oral tradition but on the way in which the author of the Second Isaiah has integrated these oral units into a larger composition. (B. S. Childs, for instance, believes the larger unit is 41:14-43:12.) In context these oracles of salvation surprise the reader after the long recitation of the wrongs committed by God’s servant Israel. Despite the fact that God had executed his divine vengeance upon Judah (42:24-25), the exiles in Babylon should not fear (43:1,5). God will redeem Judah despite its sin (43:1b).

Psalm 29

This *hymn* is an “enthronement psalm” that celebrates God’s rule over heaven and earth. The physical power of a thunderstorm is the psalm’s figure for the power of God which the hymn calls upon all the gods of heaven (29:1) to acknowledge along with the worshipers in the Temple (29:9-11). As such, the psalm becomes an interchange in which both human beings and the very creation itself delights in God’s kingship. The similarities of certain sequences in the psalm have suggested to some interpreters a dependence upon Canaanite poetry and could argue in their minds for an early date for the composition.

Acts 8:14-17

The author of Luke-Acts may have thought that the region of Samaria had a single capital city by the same name and that the conversion of “multitudes” within this main city (8:5) was tantamount to the conversion of the entire region of Samaria. Although the author’s tradition told him that Philip alone was the one responsible for these conversions, the author “regularizes” the baptisms of the Samaritans by having the apostles in Jerusalem send Peter and John to them so that they might receive the Holy Spirit. Perhaps the author was uncomfortable with the legitimacy of a large Christian community without a direct link to the apostles in Jerusalem. (H. Conzelmann). We must remember, though, that Jewish tradition taught that the Holy Spirit had ceased from Israel at the desecration of the temple by Antiochus Epiphanes and would not return to Israel until the age of the messiah. So the conferring of the Spirit by the laying on of hands is an eschatological act, showing the author’s belief that the messianic age had arrived.

Luke 3:15–16, 21–22

Luke’s account is based on Mark’s (Mark 1:7–11) but emphasizes the large number of people in attendance at Jesus’ Baptism (Luke 3:21). By having the Spirit appear “in bodily form” (3:22), Luke makes this large assembly witness to the vision that in Mark and Matthew is reserved to Jesus alone.