

The Second Sunday After the Epiphany
Cycle A RCL
Revised

Isaiah 49:1–7

Second Isaiah (Isaiah 40-55) contains four songs about a "servant" (Isaiah 42:1–4, 49:1–6, 50:4–9, and 52:13–53:12). Our lesson contains the second of these *Servant Songs* in which we may easily identify the "servant" as Israel (49:3); but the servant in the other three *Servant Songs* presents difficulties in identification. Verses 1-2 remind us of the call narrative in Jeremiah 1:5 where the Lord tells the prophet that he knew him before he formed him in his mother's womb. The failure the prophet laments in verse 4 may be the call to leave Babylon.

Psalm 40:1-12

Our psalm for today is the first of two songs contained within a single numbered psalm. The first is a *thanksgiving* (40:1–10), and the second is a *personal lament* (40:11–17). The ancient practice involved bringing one's petitions before the Lord in the Jerusalem temple by means of a lament. When the prayer was answered, the petitioner returned to the temple to pray a thanksgiving that had the added benefit of proclaiming to all who hear that Yahweh delivers the faithful one from distress (40:9–10). Ordinarily, a thanksgiving contains a reference to the original lament, and 40:1-2 appear to fulfill this function. Some commentators wonder why a thanksgiving and lament should be arranged in this order. Notice, however, that Psalms 34-35 preserve exactly such a sequence. The only difference is that they comprise two numbered psalms, not one. When we recognize the arbitrary nature of chapter divisions, we can reasonably believe that Psalm 40 simply contains two different psalms.

1 Corinthians 1:1–9

1 Corinthians is a letter of Paul from Ephesus to a church he had founded in Corinth some time previously. Evidently, disputes had arisen among the Corinthian Christians, and some of them had asked their founder, St. Paul, to intervene.

Corinth, located on a four-mile-wide isthmus between the Aegean and the Gulf of Corinth, had become rich and prosperous because of the sea trade. Many ships that called upon Corinth's port of Cenchreae were pulled on rollers across the four miles of dry land to a port on the Gulf of Corinth and *vice versa*, thus avoiding the hazardous voyage around the southern tip of Greece.

The city had a reputation in the ancient world as a wicked city because of its temple to Aphrodite on Mt. Corinth outside the city, which at one time was host to as many as a thousand cult prostitutes. Later Greek speakers transformed the name of the city into a verb "to Corinth," meaning to live in a profligate manner. Paul's Corinth probably didn't live up fully to its bad repute in classical times, but people still thought of it as a wild city.

John 1:29–41

At least one modern printed lectionary incorrectly and unfortunately rewrote verse 29 to begin with the words, "The day after John had baptized Jesus" (*Episcopal Eucharistic Lectionary: New Revised Standard Version* [Wichita: St. Martin's Press, n. d., 47]). In fact, John does not baptize Jesus at all in the Fourth Gospel and recasts the vision of the dove and the audition of the heavenly voice as belonging to John the Baptist and not to Jesus. This is part of the Fourth Gospel's general subordination of John the Baptist to Jesus as prefigured in the Prologue at John 1:6–8.

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