

CHRISTMAS I

This Bible study was written by Susan Sevier for Christmas 1 in 2012.

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the Lord;
my whole being shall exult in my God,
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation;
he has covered me with the robe of
righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to
spring up,
so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.
62 For Zion's sake I will not keep silent,
and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest,
until her vindication shines out like the dawn
and her salvation like a burning torch.
² The nations shall see your vindication
and all the kings your glory,
and you shall be called by a new name
that the mouth of the Lord will give.
³ You shall be a beautiful crown in the hand of
the Lord
and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

Commentary from Susan Sevier

The writings of the prophet Isaiah are some of the most prominent as we walk through the teachings of Advent and Christmas, and today's lectionary cycle begins with an outburst of hope and salvation – not a bad beginning for our worship on this first day of the Christmas season.

In these words, we hear the kind of hope that many of us may be feeling at this time, looking back on our holiday celebrations and looking forward to the promise of the New Year ahead. But read carefully; the hope in our text is the hope that comes with second chances, the hope that is built on the ashes of failure. It is a second marriage in v. 10; it is a return to fertility from fallowness that fills the garden of v. 11; it is, in fact, the return from exile to the land of Israel. It is the hope born of learning our lessons, licking our wounds and pulling together our inner strength to start again. And yet, it is a song of praise and thanksgiving that invites us all to live into this time, this season, and every day of our lives, fully – full of hope and possibility. Let your praises ring; let your hope fill the air. That is the message of this reading for today.

Discussion Questions

Take a minute, and read this passage again along with the “Song of the Vineyard” in Isaiah 5. Compare the condemnation of that passage with the thanksgiving and praise of today's reading. How far has Israel come from the moment of exile? What lessons are there for us in this? How can we move from our lowest point to reclaim that feeling of hope and praise and thanksgiving that can help us move on and continue our work in this world? Who is the speaker in verses 62:1-3? Is it God? Or is it the unknown writer? Is it meant to be you or me? When have you stepped forward to praise the Lord in a time when things around you did not look necessarily praiseworthy? What does the ability to praise from a place of faith rather than from a place of proof say about the strength of your faith?

Psalm 147

- ¹ Hallelujah! How good it is to sing praises to our God! *
how pleasant it is to honor him with praise!
- ² The Lord rebuilds Jerusalem; *
he gathers the exiles of Israel.
- ³ He heals the brokenhearted *
and binds up their wounds.
- ⁴ He counts the number of the stars *
and calls them all by their names.
- ⁵ Great is our Lord and mighty in power; *
there is no limit to his wisdom.
- ⁶ The Lord lifts up the lowly, *
but casts the wicked to the ground.
- ⁷ Sing to the Lord with thanksgiving; *
make music to our God upon the harp.
- ⁸ He covers the heavens with clouds *
and prepares rain for the earth;
- ⁹ He makes grass to grow upon the mountains *
and green plants to serve mankind.
- ¹⁰ He provides food for flocks and herds *
and for the young ravens when they cry.
- ¹¹ He is not impressed by the might of a horse; *
he has no pleasure in the strength of a man;
- ¹² But the Lord has pleasure in those who fear him, *
in those who await his gracious favor.]
- ¹³ Worship the Lord, O Jerusalem; *
praise your God, O Zion;
- ¹⁴ For he has strengthened the bars of your gates; *
he has blessed your children within you.
- ¹⁵ He has established peace on your borders; *
he satisfies you with the finest wheat.
- ¹⁶ He sends out his command to the earth, *
and his word runs very swiftly.
- ¹⁷ He gives snow like wool; *
he scatters hoarfrost like ashes.
- ¹⁸ He scatters his hail like bread crumbs; *
who can stand against his cold?
- ¹⁹ He sends forth his word and melts them; *
he blows with his wind, and the waters flow.
- ²⁰ He declares his word to Jacob, *
his statutes and his judgments to Israel.
- ²¹ He has not done so to any other nation; *
to them he has not revealed his judgments.
Hallelujah!

Commentary from Susan Sevier

Our psalm for today is part of what is often called the "Hallelujah collection," a five-psalm set that brings to a close the Psalter and therefore continues the praise and thanksgiving of our reading from Isaiah. In particular, the psalm continues praise and thanks for the blessings granted to Jerusalem. It offers praise for the God who provides, praise for the God who renews and uses nature imagery to weave this hymn of praise. But again, it is a hymn of praise built on the ashes of failure, because like our passage from Isaiah, this song is a song at the end of exile. And we know that the historical truth was that the Jerusalem to which the Israelites returned was smaller, more poor and in many ways a pile of rubble. At the end of the period of exile, the Israelites had nothing; they needed the God that made the grass grow and the water flow. And they needed the God that would strengthen their gates and grant peace where there had been none. And yet, in that need, they were still able to sing praises and remember the majesty of that God, the God that heals the brokenhearted and binds up their wounds.

Discussion Questions

In this season of Christmas, many of us have given and received gifts. And despite the piles of things and gifts that surround us, and the general bounty of the culture in which we live, maybe we too, are empty-handed like the Israelites and in need of the God who provides. The question of this psalm is, can we look past our material surroundings and see what is important? Can we stand empty-handed before God despite our material comforts and sing praises of thanksgiving for all God does for this world? Read carefully v. 7-11 and v. 15-20. There are two types of giving here. What are they? Are there any conditions on that giving? Is there any particular danger in v. 20?

And finally, this psalm is written completely from the perspective of the receiver, not the giver. What is it like to be the receiver? What is like to need the gift, as did the people of Jerusalem? How does the knowledge that we need the gifts God has to offer change our relationship with our Maker?

Galatians 3:23-25, 4:4-7

²³Now before faith came, we were imprisoned and guarded under the law until faith would be revealed. ²⁴Therefore the law was our disciplinarian until Christ came, so that we might be reckoned as righteous by faith. ²⁵But now that faith has come, we are no longer subject to a disciplinarian.

⁴But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, born of a woman, born under the law, ⁵in order to redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as children. ⁶And because you are children, God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, “Abba! Father!” ⁷So you are no longer a slave but a child, and if a child then also an heir through God.

Commentary from Susan Sevier

Our psalm of praise and thanksgiving ends with a statement of Israel’s chosen position among all nations, that they are chosen because they alone adhere to God’s ordinances or Torah. And our passage from Galatians begins by connecting our obedience to God’s laws and faith in the redemptive power of Christ. Here we stand, drained by the Advent journey to Christmas, and Paul offers us a vision of the Pentecost ahead: yes, God sent the child born of woman to lead us from simple obedience to the Law, and now, because we, as children of God, have accepted that greatest gift of all, we receive the blessing of the Holy Spirit in our hearts.

Discussion Questions

Paul says that the Holy Spirit enters our hearts crying “Abba, Father!” Why? What does this tell us about our relationship with God and with Jesus? In the Greek text, at the beginning of v. 7, the pronoun “you” changes from the plural form used early in the passage to a singular form: the text suddenly becomes less universal and more personal. What does this mean for Paul’s message to us?

John 1:1-18

¹ In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ² He was in the beginning with God. ³ All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴ in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵ The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overtake it.

⁶ There was a man sent from God whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹ The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet the world did not know him. ¹¹ He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹² But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, ¹³ who were born, not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

¹⁴ And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth. ¹⁵ (John testified to him and cried out, "This was he of whom I said, 'He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me.'") ¹⁶ From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷ The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Commentary from Susan Sevier

Our gospel passage for the day contains words that are simultaneously among the most comfortable and the most difficult in all the gospel texts. We hear the story told from the creation of the world through the resurrection of Jesus as the Christ. We are offered the Word, who was one with God, who became flesh and walked among us, but we do not know Him. And we hear the echo of Paul's letter to the Galatians in v. 17: "The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." And then, if we believe, the light will dawn and we too will see God through his Son, Jesus Christ.

Discussion Questions

Much of this passage is devoted to the unfolding identity of Jesus in the world. What metaphors are used to describe him? What do those metaphors mean to us today?

Read through the passage and look at all the references to "light." And then, think about the first creation story, in which God creates the world with the words "Let there be light" (Gen. 1:3). What relationship is there between these two passages?

In v. 10, we are told that Jesus was here on earth, but the people did not know him: "He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him." What are the ways every day (and in particular during this crazy holiday season) that we miss the presence of Christ in our world and our lives?