

Third Sunday of Advent Dec. 11, 2022

Isaiah 35:1-10
Psalm 146:5-10
Luke 1:47-55
James 5:7-10
Matthew 11:2-11

Isaiah 35:1-10

Water may seem rare in the desert but evidence of it is everywhere. There are dry canyons, arroyos, wadis, and draws everywhere you look. While traveling with a friend in New Mexico, we drove on a bridge that ran over parched earth one day only to drive over it again the next day with a raging torrent underneath us, almost overtopping the road. Some smart engineer did a lot of research and put a lot of time into building a bridge in exactly the right place, the place where in some ephemeral future moment, the water will go.

This passage of Isaiah is a call to see things that aren't there. Crocus in bloom, blind people being sighted, the arrival of God to save us. I imagine Isaiah wearing a fluorescent vest and a hardhat with a roll of construction documents under his arm, gesturing toward a desolate wasteland saying with great confidence: "The highway will be there."

The promises of God seem rare but evidence of them is everywhere. In this season of Advent, where we wait for the incarnation of God, let us look for evidence of God's promises.

- Where do you see evidence of God's promises in your life?
- Where in our world today would Isaiah point and say, "The highway will be there?"

Psalm 146:5-10

"Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob . . . who keeps faith forever" (Ps. 146:5-6).

One attribute of God that I have always had a hard time accepting is un-changeability or immutability. God changes God's mind after Noah's flood, promising never to do something like that again. But more importantly, how can it be the case that God is utterly unaffected by the happenings of the world? Is God unchanged by millions of COVID dead?

This is a big theological question—far above my pay grade—but I find in this psalm a comforting nuance. Set aside for a moment whether God is indeed unchangeable. The main issue for us, down here in the muck and mire of Advent 2022, is whether God keeps faith. Amidst all of *gestures broadly* this, God keeps faith. Better yet, God has a solid record of adapting the manner of God's faithfulness to something we can understand. John Calvin calls this accommodation. God created, God led the people out of bondage, God sent the law and the prophets, God sent God's only son, God sent the Holy Spirit and left us with the peace that passes all understanding.

As we prepare for the arrival of God's only son, that particular manifestation of God's faithfulness, I am grateful that God is still accommodating us—keeping faith forever!

- Where do you see God keeping faith with you and your community?
- Where in Scripture or study do you find examples of God accommodating us to show God's faithfulness?

Luke 1:47-55

I have a great-grandmother who is widely admired in our family for her sense of history. She captured important moments with clarity and winsomeness. She and her family survived the Great Miami Hurricane of 1926 and she captured the vivid details of the ravaged coastline. She also wrote the fantastic story of her husband trapped on the roof of the house, axing his way through the ceiling into safety, bringing with him a torrent of rain, and then her subsequent unending changes of stockings until her husband gently admonished her that nobody would think her immodest if she was without stockings in the immediate aftermath of a deadly hurricane.

She knew when important things happened and she needed hardly any hindsight to know something worth capturing had occurred. She is not unlike Mary in that way, as we see in the *Magnificat*, named as such because Mary's soul magnifies the Lord. Mary has just heard from the angel Gabriel that she is to bear a son, and she immediately goes to see her cousin Elizabeth to convey the news. But in this song, she doesn't simply say, "I'm to have a son." Rather, she narrates beautifully the interplay of herself, God, and the world to come as a result of the news she has just received. Mary has a sense of what is happening to her specifically, and what is happening to the wider world.

Part of having a strong sense of history is understanding this dynamic relationship between the individual stories and the broader context of those stories. Mary understands the Mighty One has done great things for her and that, at the same time, God will lift up all the lowly. Not just her.

- Where do you see God connecting your life and vocation to God's actions in the wider world?
- As we await a central and monumentally historical event of God in the birth of Jesus, what is an action of God in your own life or in the world around you that warrants more attention and historical interest?

James 5:7-10

I learned recently that I have a difficult time managing imperfections. Instead of living with imperfection, I try to solve the imperfection by either creating an elaborate fantasy that would fix everything, or writing off the entire situation as unredeemable and not worth engaging. What I need to do instead is address the imperfect situation as it is.

When I read this passage in James, I hear an admonition to do something similar. James is writing to people waiting for the coming of the Lord. This is an imperfect place to be. But James is teaching the people how to live in the imperfection. Part of it is patience, which is to say knowing what you can and, more importantly, cannot control. But then, there is also the work of strengthening one's heart and not grumbling with one's neighbor. The Benedictines have a motto, *ora et labora*, meaning pray and work. Work on what you can and pray for what you cannot. In the Advent season, I view that as waiting patiently for the imminent coming of Jesus, but also strengthening my heart so I am better prepared when it happens.

- What aspects of your life require patience in this advent season?
- Where in your life must you strengthen your heart to prepare for the incarnation?

Matthew 11:2-11

Chico Marx once asked, “Who are you gonna believe? Me or your own eyes?” In this passage from Matthew, Jesus says to do both! To John the Baptist’s questioners, Jesus says, “Look around you. Blind people have sight, lepers are healed, the dead are raised. The proof is in the pudding!” But then to the larger crowds, Jesus continues with his evaluation of John the Baptist. John didn’t have the imprimatur of Herod (the reed being a symbol of Herod’s reign), John is not among the elite, John does not hang out in palaces. And yet John is greater than a prophet, the greatest of those born . . . but the least in the kingdom is greater than him.

On the one hand, Jesus points to the simple fact of the miracles occurring around him. Am I the Messiah? Use your eyes and see! On the other hand, Jesus directs the crowds to see something not readily obvious about the wild man John. The crowds have to trust Jesus to see something in John that they themselves may not see.

I want so badly for the ministry of Jesus to just be all sorts of things I can see with my own eyes. I want the release of the prisoners, the provision of sight to the blind, the proclamation of good news, and the year of the Lord’s favor. But what we get all throughout Jesus’ ministry is a dynamic tension between observable miracles and the twists and turns of parables, subversive speech, and eschatological visions. Who are you going to believe? Sometimes we’re lucky enough to believe our own eyes, other times we must trust Jesus. Lord I believe, help my unbelief.

- Where in your life can you believe the promises of advent with your own eyes? What areas of the world or your own life are you hoping God can show you something not readily obvious?
- What expectations are you hoping God can subvert?