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Third Sunday of Advent, December 17, 2017

The Third Sunday of Advent often focuses on love: in many congregations the liturgical color for this week, or the color of the candle, is pink rather than the purple or blue that marks the rest of Advent. It is also the week that highlights Mary. A service that allows worshipers to begin to connect with the powerful promises of Isaiah and of the Magnificat - and of the way that these two are intertwined, with John's path-making in the wilderness, will do the important work of describing 'love' as something more than sentiment.

The scriptures this week powerfully and clearly connect the coming of Jesus into this world with righteousness, justice, and the overthrowing of corruption. They promise changes in status. Love and justice are bound together. The Jesus whom we welcome is notable because he is an agitator (not a baby who never cries!)

We offer this reminder each week because it matters: This word "impoverished" is not used by accident – it indicates that people are made poor, rather than just show up poor. This is a loaded idea, because if people are made poor, one must ask what makes them poor. A congregation that is not yet accustomed to talking about institutional and systemic oppression can learn to wrestle with the reality that Jesus speaks into systems: that his turning over the tables of money changers was simply a concrete example of what he was about.

As you plan for this week, use the suggestions below to craft a service that will help to draw congregants into an Advent full of the expectation that Jesus will upend injustice, inequity, and iniquity, and likewise that Jesus will call us into this very work - in his name.

Scripture Notes

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

- Spirit:
 - Isaiah attributes the promises of good news to the anointing of the spirit of the Lord. It is important to remember that Isaiah's treatment of the spirit precedes the gospel narratives in which the spirit descends. But the claim that these promises are holy is powerful: they were powerful then and they are powerful right now.
- Good news:
 - The connection between the Gospel (good news) that narrates our Christian faith and the "good news" to the oppressed proclaimed in Isaiah is spectacular.
 - The promises that follow all herald changes in status:
 - Hearts that are broken will be bound;
 - Captives will be made free;
 - Prisoners will be released;
 - The Lord's favor and vengeance will overthrow the status quo;
 - Those who mourn will be comforted;
 - Praise will infuse those whose spirits are faint.
- The Lord's love and justice:
 - The use of the word translated "love" in this passage to describe the Lord's relationship with justice is not to be overlooked on a week that focuses on love!
 - Justice is juxtaposed with robbery and wrongdoing.
- New growth:
 - The growth of something new is described twice in this passage:

- The first use of the image of “new growth” describes those who mourn in Zion as oaks of righteousness planted by the Lord and demonstrating his glory.
 - The second use of the image of “new growth” describes righteousness and praise springing up from the nations in the way that shoots grow up in a garden.
 - “Righteousness” is at the heart of both of these descriptions:
- Connections to tax reform will name both the good news and those to whom it comes in such a way that evokes the most economically fragile and makes clear the systems and practices to which they are captive. The “justice” which is described as being loved by the Lord will be described as that which opposes “robbery and wrongdoing” – the sort that results from tax structures which make the rich richer while exacerbating the poverty of the impoverished.

Psalm 126

- **Restoring Fortunes:**
 - The pattern of thinking and believing found in the prosperity gospel complicates appropriate preaching about “fortune.”
 - Zionism complicates appropriate teaching about the “fortunes of Zion.” And during this season when the president of the United States has declared Jerusalem to be the capital of Israel, and when a particular set of Evangelical Christians have heralded the restoration of Zion as a welcomed step toward the end-times, language about the restoration of the fortunes of Zion must be handled delicately and with respect.
 - Note that restorations of Zion are a memory, and the plea, “restore our fortunes” is in response to that memory.
 - Nevertheless, the idea of watercourses in the Negeb is beautiful – life-giving waters nourishing what is now desert. Nothing can grow without nourishing water – and communities cannot thrive without nourishing resources.
 - The yearning for laughter and joy in place of tears and weeping is heartbreaking and invigorating – how can we participate in restoration?
- Connections to tax reform will describe the restoration of fortune as the restoration of nourishing, life-giving sources of survival.

Luke 1:46b-55

- **Magnificat**
 - Mary’s Magnificat is a gift of evocative descriptions of the mighty being overthrown.
 - Mercy is for those who fear the Lord rather than the powers and principalities of this world.
 - The Lord’s strong arm has scattered the proud when their hearts lust after that which is not God.
 - The descriptions evoke the language of equity found in Isaiah and John: the high will be made low and the low will be raised. Here, the powerful will be brought down and the lowly will be lifted.
 - Furthermore, the hungry are promised being made full, and the rich are promised emptiness.
 - The coming of Jesus is linked to the promises of God made to Abraham and his ancestors.
- Connections to tax reform will name the forces and systems which, though mighty, must be overthrown for the lowly to be lifted and the hungry to be filled with good things.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

- **Make straight the way of the Lord!**
 - This passage from John places the language from Isaiah 40 on the lips of John the Baptist.
 - Here, John confesses, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord.’”
 - Making straight the way involves pointing to the Messiah. John rejects the idea that he, himself, is worthy of much, making the claim, “I am not worthy to untie the thong of this sandal.” He has come to testify, to point, to describe, to teach, and he does it from a position of self-denial and self-deprecation.
 - How, then, can we participate in making straight the way of the Lord? How can we interact with ideas of worth in faith communities that include those who value themselves too highly and those who unable to see their worth? How must we live in order to point to the Messiah?
- **Testify to the Light**
 - This passage says that John came to “testify to the light.” This cannot be separated from the verses just before which describe Jesus as embodying life which is the light of all people, a light which could not be put out. (John 1:5).
 - Significantly, John 1 twice uses the phrase “testify to the light.”
 - Furthermore, John 1 says that John came to “testify to the light” so that “all might believe.”
 - Testifying to the light and pointing to the Messiah are the same task. How are we called to participate?
- Connections to tax reform will encourage engagement, and counter the idea that one need not get involved in policy discussions. Emphasis on Jesus’ propensity to overthrow the status quo and the powerful, both in his ministry and in the prophecies, requires a testimony to that particular sort of light in the world.

Suggested Sermon/Service Themes

Wild and Barren

- The Psalm and the gospel reading for this week both reference geography that is wild and barren.
- The Psalm references “watercourses in the Negeb.”
- John the Baptists is the voice crying out in the wilderness.
- Together, these provide powerful images Jesus as one who comes into desolation to accomplish a salvation that nourishes the hungry and overthrows the powerful.
- Use “wild and barren” to accurately describe those places most destroyed by bad policy, violence, and systems that impoverish. Use “wild and barren” to describe the reality of those who cannot make ends meet in the midst of illness, broken families, food insecurity, uninsured losses, the greed of unscrupulous landlords, and a pitiful minimum wage.
- Shape your service so that worshipers might respond to the call to participate in systems that nourish wild and barren land as water might nourish the Negeb, or to the call to testify to light which cannot be overcome. Allow for the possibility that rightly worshipping God emboldens those gathered to advocate for the economy of Jesus.

Testify to the Light:

- This theme can take on some of the work suggested by the theme “Wild and Barren.” But “Testify to the Light” will more heavily emphasize the work of testimony, and the light to which one must testify.
- The idea of “testimony” usually invokes that pattern of sharing one’s salvation experience or the work of being a witness in a judicial proceeding. Shape the service so that worshippers are able to imagine something with nuanced differences.
 - Testimony, here, is not to one’s own salvation experience, but to the Light which is specifically described in John 1: 3-5 in this way: “What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.”
 - Testimony, here, sits outside of the law.
 - One who chooses to join John the Baptist in testifying to the light and preparing a way for the Lord have a unique testimony: it is about Jesus and all people; it is about light and darkness.
- Shape your service so that worshipers might leave with a new conviction about their testimony and the places into which this testimony might be delivered. Where, in your community, will their testimony matter?

Worship Resources

Responsive Reading 1 (using Magnificat and John 1)

One: My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior.

Many: Testify to the Light!

One: The Lord has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts and has brought down the powerful from their thrones.

Many: Testify to the Light!

One: The Lord has lifted up the lowly and has filled the hungry with good things.

Many: Testify to the Light!

One: The Lord has sent the rich away empty.

Many: Testify to the Light!

All: “Comfort, my people,” says our God.

Responsive Reading 2 (using Psalm 126 and Isaiah 6)

One: The Lord sends good news to the oppressed.

Many: May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

One: The Lord brokenhearted shall be bound. Captives shall be made free.

Many: May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

One: Prisoners shall be released. The Lord's favor and vengeance are moving.

Many: May those who sow in tears reap with shouts of joy!

One: Those who mourn shall be comforted.

All: The Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up.

Confession 1

God of the rainbow and the pillars of smoke in the desert; God of mana and God of "you will never be thirsty;" God of Israel and God of (your city) – we wait for you to come again. We wait for love to break into our darkness and chaos. We wait for the time when shouts of joy burst from the darkness. But we confess that the waiting is hard. We confess that your promises are beautiful but that they are also scary. We confess that we might not be ready for our own worlds to be turned upside down, even as we pray for your powerful love to nourish righteousness. We confess that even as we pray, "come quickly Lord Jesus," we hesitate when faced with the challenged of doing kingdom work in our own communities. Show us, God, where you are at work around us so that we might testify, and so that we might be made bold. Amen.

Confession 2

God whom we magnify, God in whom we rejoice – we confess that our praise is complicated. We confess that we can't always muster praise in the midst of chaos and longing. We confess that sometimes the praise we are able to wrestle onto our lips is a thin façade covering vast emptiness. And we confess that sometimes our praise becomes busy work that keeps us from kingdom work. Free us, God, from all that impairs our praise. Bind our broken hearts and fill them with your love which changes everything. Amen.

Suggested Hymns and Worship Songs:

Angels from the Realms of Glory

Blessed Be the God of Israel

Build Your Kingdom Here (Rend Collective)

Called As Partners in Christ's Service

Christians All, Your Lord is Coming

Come, O Long-expected Jesus

From Heaven Above (tune: Von Himmel Hoch)

For Everyone Born

Love Came Down

My Soul Magnifies the Lord (Chris Tomlin)

O Come, All Ye Faithful

O Little Town of Bethlehem

One Candle Is Lit

People, Look East

Prepare the Way of the Lord (Taize)

Rise Up, O Saints of God!

Turning Over Tables (The Brilliance)

We Call Ourselves Disciples