

Advent and Christmastide Lectionary Resources

From the Office of Immigration Issues

Office of the General Assembly

Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.)



About this resource:

As we enter the season of Advent, the Office of Immigration Issues offers this brief study guide for the Sunday lectionary. For each Sunday, we have prepared brief contextual notes for a few of the lectionary readings, including where possible and appropriate their context in the Bible, in history, and in interpretation to assist with worship preparation or with group bible study. We also offer some questions and thoughts to ponder as you prepare for worship.

Resource by: Madeline Hart-Andersen, Polity Intern; M.Div Student at Austin Presbyterian Theological Seminary.

Cover Art by: Randy Hobson, Manager, Design and Multimedia, Office of the General Assembly

1st Sunday in Advent

Isaiah 64:1-9

Context: This passage in Isaiah is a communal lament in the face of the devastation of the Babylonian exile and destruction of the temple. The people are living in exile, under Babylonian rule in Babylon. Their lament grapples with what feels like God's abandonment of God's chosen people, and the people's frustration with God's inaction, as well as their concern that it was their own actions that caused it all.

Questions: Who might cry out a communal lament like this today? Who can we imagine feels abandoned by God? What happens when we must question our own righteousness – in verse 5, the question is raised: have God's own people done what is right in God's eyes?

1 Cor. 1:3-9

Context: This is Paul's letter to the church at Corinth, written in the first century, probably within a generation of Christ. This church was one Paul had started a few years earlier. From the rest of his letter, we understand that the Corinthian church was in some turmoil, with false teachings and divisions arising. His letter covers a wide variety of topics, all aimed at helping heal the divisions and correct the teachings. The opening of his letter establishes Paul's authority and apostolicity, which had been challenged. Following his defense, Paul greets the church at Corinth with both thanksgiving and blessing.

Questions: We know this is followed by a long chastisement; what does beginning with thanksgiving and blessing imply about the church? Who are we called to be in and through Jesus Christ?

Mark 13:24-37

Context: Mark was most likely the first gospel written, probably around 60-70 CE. This reading is the final section of a longer eschatological dialogue, often called "the little apocalypse." The little apocalypse draws apocalyptic imagery from the prophets Isaiah, Joel, Ezekiel, and Daniel. The final section focuses on keeping awake and waiting, which foreshadows the passion narrative events.

Questions: The little apocalypse raises questions about the already and not-yet nature of Christian belief – how do we live waiting for the return that could happen at any moment while also living into the reality that Christ has already come? Where do we find the signs of Christ's kingdom? The watching and waiting described here are not passive but active. How do we "keep awake" in the world we live in?

2nd Sunday in Advent:

Isaiah 40:1-11

Context: This reading comes from second Isaiah, which was written following the destruction of Jerusalem by the Babylonians and the subsequent deportation of the elite. Isaiah's words are meant for a people in deep distress, whose political, social, and religious structures have been destroyed. In the context of the ancient world, the defeat of a people implied that their god had also been defeated.

Questions: God calls us through Isaiah to “comfort my people,” and then offers a vision of what that comfort might look like. How do we participate in God’s call to comfort? Who in our community/nation/world may feel like the people to whom the prophet speaks? Who do we identify as God’s people? The Isaiah passage is full of joy in the face of deep lament, spoken by one of the lamenting. In a world where the imperialistic tendencies of the Christian church caused tragedy, destruction, and lament that reverberate until today, how do we reckon with a psalm that speaks joy to the oppressed when that oppression has its roots in our church?

2 Peter 3:8-15a

Context: Though attributed to Peter, many believe the letter was most likely written in his name following his death by one of his followers. 2 Peter was written sometime between the end of the first century and the middle of the second. During this time, the early Christians were intermittently persecuted by a variety of Roman authorities. This passage in 2 Peter deals with the question of the “delay of the Parousia,” the realization in the early church that Jesus’ return might not occur right away.

Questions: The author of 2 Peter is dealing with what is a new reality for the early Christian communities: how do they live together when it now seems that Jesus’ return is not imminent? What sort of persons ought you to be? In a nation divided on the issue of immigration, how do we live into the hope for new heavens and a new earth?

Mark 1:1-8

Context: Mark was most likely the first gospel written, probably around 60-70 CE. The Gospel of Mark opens with a quote from today’s reading from Isaiah, and with John the Baptizer, who foretells the coming of “the one who is more powerful than I.” During this time period, some of the Jews in Galilee had revolted against the Roman rule locally, and the leadership of the Roman Empire is in turmoil. Mark wrote this gospel in the midst of war that was dividing the people who lived in the Holy Land.

Questions: As we wait the coming of the Christ-child, how do we hear John’s message of repentance for the forgiveness of sins? The Isaiah passage Mark quotes before introducing John speaks to communal lament and communal joy. As immigrants across the country face deportation, harassment by enforcement officials, and lack of opportunity, what does John’s call to repent of sins as we wait for the coming of the one more powerful mean to us?

3rd Sunday in Advent

Isa 61:1-4, 8-11

Context: This passage in Isaiah comes from Third Isaiah, written in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile and the return to Judah. It promises redemption and restoration to the people. This section of Isaiah has two “voices”, the prophet and God, who speaks in first person in vs 8-9, though the prophet has two tones – vs 1-4 describe what the prophet has been called to do, and vs 10-11 seem more like a response to God’s promises in vs 8-9.

Questions: This passage describes what the Lord has called the prophet – and as Christians understand it, Jesus – to do. As the church, we understand ourselves to be continuing Christ’s work in the world. How does this passage challenge the church? As we look back on a year filled with a particularly high level of vitriol leveled at immigrant communities, especially DACA recipients, how have we responded to the call to bring good news to the oppressed? As undocumented immigrants of all ages are detained in detention centers around the country, how is the church proclaiming release to the prisoners and liberty to the captives? As families are torn apart and communities destroyed by deportations, are we providing comfort for those who mourn?

Psalm 126

Context: It is not clear from the text when Psalm 126 was written. It retells a salvation story, and then follows with the hope of a restoration of fortune. It is one of the psalms of Ascents, which were probably used for some sort of procession, perhaps into Jerusalem, or into the temple itself. The Negeb, mentioned in vs 4, is a desert region with no permanent rivers or waterways.

Questions: This psalm looks forward to a time when sorrow will be replaced with joy. What might this psalm sound like in modern language? Who are those who sow in tears? The psalmist describes a restoration that fills their mouths with laughter and their tongues with shouts of joy. What does restoration mean to you and your community? What are the seeds sown in tears that might be reaped with shouts of joy?

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Context: The Gospel of John was most likely written at the end of the first century, or the beginning of the second. It introduces John “the Baptizer” as a prophet and a witness to two of the important concerns of the gospel itself – incarnation and Christology. It’s also important to note historical context in the interpretation of John: this gospel has often been used to promote and excuse anti-Jewishness. When this gospel speaks of “the Jews,” it’s important to critique and challenge what that meant then and what it means now.

Questions: What does this description of John as witness and prophet, rather than “baptizer” change? If the church understood its role to be more like that of John, preparing the world for the Messiah, what would that look like in practice? Though it is not mentioned in this passage, or in this gospel, we know that John was beheaded for his efforts. How does that shift our understanding of faithful witness?

4th Sunday in Advent

2 Sam 7:1-11, 16

Context: 2 Samuel is part of the Deuteronomistic history. In chapter 5, the tribes unite under David, and in chapter 6, David brings the ark of the Lord into the city. The word of the Lord appears to Nathan, describing the ways in which God has worked to set David as king, and culminates in what has come to be known as the Davidic covenant, that the house of David is secure and the throne of David established forever. For Christians, and the writers of the New Testament, Jesus is understood to be the fulfillment of that covenant.

Questions: This passage begins with a self-assured David, who knows, without consulting God, exactly what God plans for him to do next. Instead, God lays out God's plan for David and his descendants in a vision to Nathan. What are the still, small voices we do not hear in our assurance we are enacting God's plan? What does it look like when we seem to think the physical building we call "church" is God's sole dwelling place? In Jesus, God did not give us what we might have expected from Nathan's vision.

Luke 1:46b-55

Context: Mary's song is the prayer and praise of a young woman who lives in occupied land under an oppressive Roman regime. As she sings this song, her joy is threaded through with the anguish and difficulty of her life. Though betrothed, Mary is a pregnant young woman in a time and place that are not friendly to her. Though she is living in her homeland, she is treated by the powers-that-be as an outsider. She is powerless, but her song is in defiance of any sense of despair. The Magnificat describes God through God's actions in helping sustain and support the oppressed, the poor, and the powerless.

Questions: As a majority white church living in a nation reckoning with its past and present white supremacy and struggling with religious freedom, how do we hear Mary's song without coopting it? This is a song that comes from the mouths of the oppressed; how can we honor their voices in our contexts? What happens if you imagine Mary to be a young immigrant woman, singing this song in defiance of immigration policies and policing activity meant to silence her and her community? As we hear Mary's voice, how do we remember that this is a song of praise and hope, not of triumphalism?

Luke 1:26-38

Context: The Gospel of Luke was probably written toward the end of the first century, drawing on Mark and other sources. Luke is often viewed as a gospel which presents Jesus as a savior for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, ability, or any other marker which makes people "other." This particular passage is the story of Gabriel's visit to Mary, a young Jewish woman living in Nazareth. Gabriel's announcement parallels other stories of miraculous births, including Ishmael, Isaac, and John the Baptist.

Questions: As we prepare for the coming of the Christ-child, who might we imagine as his mother today? God chooses to break into our world as the Word-made-flesh, born of this particular young woman, in this particular time and place. Mary is an unlikely candidate for the mother of the one who will "reign over the house of Jacob forever," of whose "kingdom there will be no end."

Christmas Eve

Isaiah 9:2-7

Context: This passage comes from First Isaiah, a series of oracles by a Judean prophet named Isaiah. It is set around the time of the end of King Uzziah's reign, as the nation entered a period of instability. Isaiah 9 is part of a series of warnings against both Israel and Judah in Isaiah 1-12.

Questions: This passage begins in darkness, and though we understand the child to be Jesus, the rest of the prophecy remains unfulfilled. How do we reckon with the lack of "endless peace" in the world? Or that "the boots of the tramping warriors and all the garments rolled in blood" have not become fuel for the fire? As we read Isaiah's oracle, what does it mean for us in this political era? The "rod of the oppressor" has not been broken, and our current immigration policies strengthen that rod.

Titus 2:11-14

Context: The Letter to Titus has a contested authorship and timeline. Some scholars hold to a Pauline authorship and date the letter to the mid 60s CE. Others believe, based on textual clues, that it was written by another author as late as the second century CE. According to the letter, Titus is an uncircumcised Greek who has been authorized by the author of the letter to put the churches in Crete in order. Thus, the letter also deals with issues of identity in an intercultural society. As with other parts of the New Testament, Titus also reflects the division between the early Christians and the Jewish community they had left.

Questions: This Titus passage offers a vision of what it means to be Christian. What does it mean to be "zealous for good deeds"? With detention centers full to overflowing, and immigrant families and communities being torn apart, how are we living lives that are self-controlled, upright, and godly? When we as a nation are complicit in such actions and policies, we have strayed far from Titus' vision. What are ways we can return to that vision of Christian life?

Luke 2:1-14 (15-20)

Context: The Gospel of Luke was probably written toward the end of the first century, drawing on Mark and other sources. Luke is often viewed as a gospel which presents Jesus as a savior for all people, regardless of race, ethnicity, poverty, gender, ability, or any other marker which makes people "other." This passage in Luke reminds us that the Jewish people living in Judea were living under Roman occupation.

Questions: As we have watched the deportation of "unregistered" people rise, what does it mean that Mary and Joseph begin this story "unregistered"? The Messiah is born and is wrapped in bands of cloth and placed in a manger. In an era that wants to present Jesus as triumphal, strong, and powerful, what does this vision of him mean for us? The shepherds and the angels remind us that "good news of great joy," can also be overwhelming, even terrifying, as power structures are threatened. If we imagine ourselves to be the shepherds, what might the "good news of great joy for all the people" be? Would we also be terrified?