

Notes for Next Sunday
Third Sunday in Advent

The Point of this Week's Readings

Old Testament (Isaiah 35:1-10). In the previous chapter we read about sulfur, blazing pitch, thorns, nettles, and brambles. In this chapter we read about blossoms, splendor, bubbling water, and green grass. It is difficult to imagine a sharper contrast. In the previous chapter Isaiah announced the coming judgment; in this chapter the prophet announces the coming deliverance. (PBC)

Epistle (James 5:7-11). James is addressing the pastors of congregations and how they are to lead their people. The reason for patience is that Jesus is still applying the benefits of His atonement on earth through the preaching of the Gospel and premature return would disrupt this work. Patience in the NT is not only a virtue required by Christians, as James indicates here, but it is also a virtue of God, who hesitates to express his anger in judgment to allow time for unbelievers to repent. (Scaer)

Gospel (Matthew 11:2-15). To say, then, that John had his doubts about Jesus as the Messiah is not to judge him as having rejected Jesus. Doubts may threaten faith, but they do not automatically rule it out or destroy it. Is significant to note what John did about his doubts. He took them to Jesus! When doubts of any kind assail our Christian faith, we too need to go to Jesus for reassurance. When we consider everything He endured for our sakes, everything He did to demonstrate His divine powers – His voluntary death and His victorious resurrection on the third day – we are reassured that we can rely on all His promises and trust Him to take us safely to Himself in heaven in His own good time. (PBC)

For more in-depth commentary on each reading, read the notes found after each text below.

OLD TESTAMENT – Isaiah 35:1-10

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus,² it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy. The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendor of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the LORD, the splendor of our God.³ Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;⁴ say to those with fearful hearts, “Be strong, do not fear; your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you.”⁵ Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.⁶ Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.⁷ The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs. In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.⁸ And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness. The unclean will not journey on it; it will be for those who walk in that Way; wicked fools will not go about on it.⁹ No lion will be there, nor will any ferocious beast get up on it; they will not be found there. But only the redeemed will walk there,¹⁰ and the ransomed of the LORD will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads. Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

35:2 rejoice ... shout for joy. See 54:1. Lebanon ... Carmel ... Sharon. Fertile areas renowned for their beautiful trees and foliage. (CSB)

35:3 feeble hands. These shake when one is afraid. As the people prepare to enter this abundant and fertile land, they are commanded to be strong. (TLSB)

35:4 fearful hearts. In Hebrew: “To those who are hasty and speedy in heart,” who are not steady and firm but want to run away and give Satan the victory. (Luther)

35:6 lame leap ... mute tongue shout. The people of the Bible considered both those who infirm and the desert wilderness to be in the clutches of death – barren and worthless (2 Sam 9:8’ Jer 2:6; Jn 9:2). This prophecy had at least partial fulfillment in Jesus’ ministry (Mk 7:31-37; Luke 7:22; John 7:37). (Concordia Pulpit Resources – Volume 10, Part 4)

35:8 highway. A road built up to make travel easier. (CSB) One of many images describing the wilderness turning into a garden, bringing the return of the exiles (41:18; 42:15). (TLSB)

35:8 the Way of Holiness.† The way set apart for the redeemed (v. 9). In ancient times, certain roads between temples were open only to those who were ceremonially pure. (CSB)

35:9 lion ... beast. Presence of ferocious beasts is a sign of God’s curse (Lev. 26:22). (TLSB)

EPISTLE – James 5:7-11

⁷ Be patient, then, brothers, until the Lord’s coming. See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop and how patient he is for the autumn and spring rains. ⁸ You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord’s coming is near. ⁹ Don’t grumble against each other, brothers, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door! ¹⁰ Brothers, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. ¹¹ As you know, we consider blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job’s perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

5:7 farmer waits. Confident that the harvest will come, a farmer patiently waits for the crop to ripen. Similarly, confidence in Christ’s return leads to patience. (TLSB)

5:9 The Judge is standing at the door! Jesus’ return is at hand and can occur at any time (Mk 13:32–37). The Lord may judge here and now, but certainly also on the Last Day. (TLSB)

5:11 Lord finally brought about. Goals and plans God has for His people; ultimately, eternal life (1:12). This purpose remains even when He permits suffering (v 10). (TLSB)

GOSPEL – Matthew 11:2-15

² When John heard in prison what Christ was doing, he sent his disciples ³ to ask him, “Are you the one who was to come, or should we expect someone else?” ⁴ Jesus replied, “Go back and report to John what you hear and see: ⁵ The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor. ⁶ Blessed is the man who does not fall away on account of me.” ⁷ As John’s disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: “What did you go out into the desert to see? A reed swayed by the wind? ⁸ If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings’ palaces. ⁹ Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. ¹⁰ This is the one about whom it is written: “I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.” ¹¹ I tell you the truth: Among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet he who is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he. ¹² From the days of John the Baptist until now, the kingdom of heaven has been forcefully advancing, and forceful men lay hold of it. ¹³ For all the Prophets and the Law prophesied until John. ¹⁴ And if you are willing to accept it, he is the Elijah who was to come. ¹⁵ He who has ears, let him hear.

11:3 the one who was to come. John the Baptist had used images of judgment to describe the ministry of the One who was coming (3:10–12). Jesus seemed not to be living up to John’s expectations of the Coming One, a title for the Messiah. (TLSB)

11:4-6 Jesus' answer in exhibits a twofold character. On the one hand, his words offer the strongest "yes!" to the first part of the Baptist's question. The deeds that Jesus has been performing are the long-expected signs of renewal and restoration in Israel. God is at work, establishing the new age of salvation! Physical infirmity signifies that the creation is a fallen and broken place because of man's sin. OT prophecy, especially in Isaiah, promises that God would come to restore and to heal. Good news is being preached to the poor, as promised in Is. 61:1. The OT promises are being fulfilled in Jesus. The age of salvation is here; He is the One who was to come. (CC pp. 556-557)

11:7-15 God, the Father of the Lord Jesus, is a "historical" God. What I mean by this is that God has always engaged His creation by coming down into it with deeds – deeds of judgment and/or salvation. Jesus teaches that in the ministry of John the Baptist, God was doing a new thing; a new time has dawned in the world. Unless Jesus' hearers would understand and recognize the significance of John, they would not be able to know what God the King was now doing, and most stunningly, how the creation's King had condescended to rule among Israel in Jesus. (CC p. 563))

11:7 about John. Before John's disciples were out of earshot, Jesus addressed the assembled crowd with word that would also reassure those disciples. He reminded the people of John's ministry and how they had responded to it. Usually prophets would have to go where the people were if they were to get a hearing. In John's case, the people flocked out to him, even though he was out in the wilderness along the Jordan River. If he had been an unstable character, like the reeds along the riverbank that would sway back and forth in every breeze, not many would have bothered to go and hear him. (PBC)

11:11 truly I say to you. Here Jesus emphasizes that John has brought the time of prophecy to an end; the Baptizer has, so to speak, one foot in the old era even as it concludes. From the point of view of God's people who still lived by the promises in the old covenant, John the Baptist is the greatest man ever born of a woman. (CC p. 566))

11:11 who is the least. But the new deed of salvation, not that God has begun to reign in Jesus, is so wondrous that even the least person who by faith now comes under that reign of blessing can be regarded as greater than John! (CC p. 566)