

## Weekly Reading – Monday, December 8, 2008

We are looking now at the readings for Advent 3B, Sunday December 14, 2008. A second week of John the Baptist, though this time from the Fourth Gospel.

Isaiah 61: 1 - 4, 8 - 11

A well known set of verses from Second Isaiah, though perhaps better known for Jesus' use of them in his inaugural sermon in Luke 4. Here they proclaim a great reversal for an exiled and downcast Israel languishing in Babylonian captivity. Instead of mourning, consolation; instead of ashes, a garland. How does the church hear and preach these familiar words today? Are they, as often is the case in preaching and interpretation, simply a call to hearers, the church in particular, to be engaged in works of justice, renewal and liberation? But in the text, it is God and God's anointed one who are doing this on behalf of God's people. Or, in a second possibility, are these words an invitation to speak words of consolation and comfort to the battered and discouraged? Certainly, that is part of it. But how are these a word about God, what God has done and is doing? How, that is, are they not simply another exhortation to us but good news for us?

I Thessalonians 5: 16 - 24

Seems such a short time ago, the closing weeks of Year A in November, that we were here in I Thessalonians. But now we're back, though under a different mandate, an Advent one. These are urgent words, written for those who dwell between the times, awaiting Christ's second coming. In such in-between times how are Christians to live? Joyfully, prayerfully, thankfully--no matter what is going on. Beyond that, Christians are to live open to the Spirit, receptive to prophecy, and in a discerning way, "testing everything." All the exhortations (and there are many, aren't there?) are set within the Lord's faithfulness and promises. He will "keep you blameless" until his coming. It's interesting that a reading that is mostly such straight on exhortation ends with a declaration of God's power and faithfulness, "The one who calls you is faithful and he will do it." The key to faithfulness between the times is complete confidence in God's power to sustain and uphold.

John 1: 6 - 8, 19 - 28

I think of this as the great Via Negativa text, for John's witness is mostly a matter of saying that he is not the Light and does not know much about the Light, except the Light is coming. In this way, it is a remarkable Advent text with a quite wonderful and amazing balancing of uncertainty/ humility ("I am not") with conviction/ promise ("Among you stands one whom you do not know"). Certainly one of greatest notes of Advent, and of a life of faith, is mystery. This text creates, invites, and sponsors mystery. First there is what the Fourth Gospel tells us about John, in vs. 6 - 8. And what we hear is that is what he is not, "not the Light," but a witness testifying to the Light. Here is a good job description for the church and for believers! Then, vs. 19 - 28, we have the marvelous interaction between John and the religious leaders, the priests and Levites who are sent out on a recon mission to see what's up with this hairy man in the desert. Three questions, three negations. The officials are beside

themselves, "Tell us something, we have to have something for our bosses." The Pharisees get into the act asking what the heck is up with the baptizing. Again, John is elliptical. "I baptize with water, but among you stands one you do not know." Isn't that just calculated to drive control freaks crazy! The religious leaders don't know him, John doesn't know him. Which is to say that human knowledge cannot capture or comprehend what God is doing, for it is by revelation, a revealing to the humble and expectant, to those who know they don't know. There is, all around us, in our midst, the hidden dimension, the hidden Christ who comes.