

The Lessons Appointed for Use on the

Third Sunday of Advent

Year B

RCL

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Luke 1:46-55

John 1:6-8, 19-28



The Collect

Stir up your power, O Lord, and with great might come among us; and, because we are sorely hindered by our sins, let your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be honor and glory, now and for ever. Amen.

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,

the devastations of many generations.

For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;

all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;

for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,

as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.

For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring
up,

so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Canticle 15

The Song of Mary *Magnificat*

Luke 1:46-55

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior;

for he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.

From this day all generations will call me blessed:

**the Almighty has done great things for me, and
holy is his Name.**

He has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.

**He has shown the strength of his arm,
he has scattered the proud in their conceit.**

He has cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.

**He has filled the hungry with good things,
and the rich he has sent away empty.**

He has come to the help of his servant Israel,
for he has remembered his promise of mercy,

**The promise he made to our fathers,
to Abraham and his children for ever.**

UNISON: Glory to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit:

as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be for ever. Amen.

John 1:6-8,19-28

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, “Who are you?” He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, “I am not the Messiah.” And they asked him, “What then? Are you Elijah?” He said, “I am not.” “Are you the prophet?” He answered, “No.” Then they said to him, “Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?” He said, “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord,’” as the prophet Isaiah said. Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, “Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?” John answered them, “I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.” This took place in Bethany across the Jordan

where John was baptizing.

SERMON

I think everyone has a know-it-all in their lives. You know the guy – the one that can hold forth on any topic, no matter how exotic, and who never, ever admits to being wrong. I remember a school trip to a farm to watch a farrier make horseshoes. Our class know-it-all was holding forth for the whole class about the different types of horseshoe. He idly reached over and picked one up to demonstrate some point, failing to notice that it had just come out of the forge.

Everybody laughed at him as he jumped back and dropped the horseshoe, and somebody said, “Don't know as much as you thought you did, huh?”

With great dignity, hiding his burned fingers in his pocket, and biting his lip, he replied, “Nawww. It just doesn't take me very long to look at a horseshoe.”

If we're going to function in this world, we have to

have a baseline amount of confidence in our abilities and understanding of how the world works, but it must be balanced by the humble admission that we DON'T actually understand everything. A little humility is essential to a successful life as a human being. Unfortunately, like my classmate, we're much happier hiding our limitations than facing up to them.

Of course, the truth is that our lives, our very existence, is as a result of things we aren't aware of – things that we take purely on faith, if we think of them at all. There really are things we don't understand or aren't aware of that actually have a very big effect on our lives, even though we don't understand them. Here's an example: There is a number called the “cosmological constant” which describes the way in which space itself expands. Einstein proposed it as an addition to his General Theory of Relativity, then abandoned it. Lately, it

has been resurrected. Chances are, you've never heard of it. Doesn't matter. The thing you need to know about it is that it appears that if it were even one millionth of one percent different than it seems to be, the universe either would have blown itself to pieces, or crushed itself into a black hole shortly after the Big Bang. If this number were even infinitesimally different, we wouldn't be here. Your very existence is by virtue of a mathematical function that you've never heard of and so never think about.

Here's something else. The protein in our blood that carries oxygen to our cells does so because of its shape. Oxygen molecules fit into it like a hand in a glove. Unfortunately, it binds even tighter to another molecule – carbon monoxide. This is why it is such a very bad idea to sit in a garage with the motor running. The finesse of the thing is that normal processes in our bodies produce

small amounts of guess what? Carbon monoxide. How come we don't poison ourselves?

Turns out the protein in the blood that we're speaking of has the power to change its shape slightly in the presence of low concentrations of carbon monoxide so that the carbon monoxide doesn't fit the protein anymore. Think of that! A protein that has the smarts to change its shape to tolerate low concentrations of carbon monoxide. I bet you never heard of that, either, but if it were otherwise, you wouldn't be here. You pay it no mind, but it absolutely determines your continued existence.

Even so mundane a thing as switching on the light when you enter a room places you at the apex of an monstrously complex chain of events leading from a swamp in the Carboniferous period a third of a billion years ago to a coal mine in West Virginia through some

baroque machinations involving copper and magnets to your home.

We're pretty resourceful thinkers. We can imagine that these things we are not aware of, and thousands of others I haven't mentioned, came to be this way by random processes. That seems a stretch for me. For me, it is as if the universe itself, from the moment of the Big Bang, has been arraying itself to graciously welcome life. Though we never think about how unlikely a thing it is that we can be here at all, let alone be able to switch on a light and read Scriptures that have been transmitted to us over three and a half millennia, the writer of Psalm 100 remind us:

Rejoice in the miracle of every day.

Shout for joy to the Lord, all the earth.

Each day IS a miracle. That we are able to be here and experience it is so improbable a thing that you

would be a fool to bet your hard-earned money on it, yet, against all odds, here we are. So, why DON'T we pay attention to these critical factors that permit us to live? Now that I've told you about them, why don't we demand that WSAZ include a report during the 5:00 weather on the state of the cosmological constant?

Of course, the world does contain people who do just that. They are called cosmologists and they spend their days thinking about the cosmological constant. You might say they are Einstein intoxicated. They are the elect, called to beat their brains out over these questions. It is their bliss and their pleasure to think about such things. If we want to be courageous Christians, I think we have to face up to the realization that for many people in this country, thinking about God is on a par with thinking about the cosmological constant. Some do, most don't.

It's as if we are all sailing on a beautiful cruise ship, but we all have internal cabins. We can't see the great sea that supports us, and we are unaware that we are traveling. In general, the passengers are unconcerned about either possibility. Their interest is in enjoying the comfortable surroundings. For some, it is given to them to glimpse the sea and sense the motion. If these few try to tell the others, the most common reaction will be a shrug, and the statement, "Oh, all that stuff doesn't matter to me. Personally, I'm more interested in the buffet. Try the shrimp."

Does this old world contain nice, considerate, moral people who are plain baffled by any talk of God or Jesus? Yes, church, it does. Does this old world contain nice, considerate, moral people who marry and raise children, and care for their aged parents and give as much thought to God's love and grace as they do to the

state of the cosmological constant? Yes, church, it does. It is not so that everyone on the planet, or even everyone in our own community, hears the call of God. For some people, the entire topic is just closed to them.

So, what do we make of this? Is an interest in religion just one more obsession some people develop? Some people like to collect butterflies, other people like to sit in pews and sing old songs?

I think not. I'm compelled by my own experience to assert that there is, behind the stained glass and familiar hymns, a reality, a cosmological constant, an inexpressible mystery, access to which some are granted, and some are not. We in the church hear Isaiah proclaim

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

and we know what he means, because we have experi-

enced it. Those outside the church hear that as mumbo-jumbo or self-delusional thinking because they haven't. Like my classmate with the horseshoe, those outside the church will hold forth at length about the delusional way church people think about their experience. It's closed to them. Naturally they don't understand us.

Left to our own devices, this is just exactly the hole in the road we'd get stuck in. Left to our own devices, those inside the church would carry on about hearing the voice of the Spirit and being Spirit guided, and those outside the church would be tolerant of the delusions of church people at best, or actively hostile to those in the church for being self-righteous bigots at worst. It would be a big mess.

Fortunately, we're not left to our own devices. Once upon a time, God handed us a hot horseshoe. As my

know-it-all classmate found out, you just can't ignore a hot horseshoe. You can pretend that it's not hot. You can pretend you didn't experience it, but you can't credibly ignore it. In our passage today, the horseshoe's name is Jesus. You can't ignore Jesus. You can hold forth against the church's understanding of Jesus and his message, you can agree with the church's understanding, but you can't ignore Him.

The people confronting John are described as “priests and Levites”. The priests would claim descent from Aaron, Moses’ brother, and the Levites from the tribe of Levy. These would be the religious professionals of the time, the ones whose business it would be to know who was who and what was what. The thing they weren't able to know, the thing that John DID know was the reality behind the events which were playing out before them. Failing to understand that a world changing

event had happened, they wanted to bang events into the shapes they knew. They asked John if he was the messiah. They asked him if he was Elijah. (Elijah, Scripture says, was taken up to heaven while still alive, and was believed to come again to announce the messiah. Jews to this day set an extra cup at Seder for Elijah, should he arrive at their door.) They asked him if he was the prophet whose coming Moses had promised in Deuteronomy:

The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own people; you shall heed such a prophet.

“No”, John told them. “I’m none of these. But there’s a game changer standing among you that you do not know, and I am not worthy to untie his shoelace.”

In First Century Judea, something happened. “Jesus something from somewhere up north”, unconnected

with the religious center at Jerusalem, appeared and changed everything. Like my classmate with the hot horseshoe, the people who witnessed reacted with shock and awe, and “Jesus something from somewhere up north” became the man known throughout the globe. Even the Koran honors him. The whole world related to this man’s coming in the same way my classmate reacted to the hot horseshoe — by realizing that they didn’t know as much as they thought they did.

“Jesus something from somewhere up north” is the most famous man to ever walk the face of the earth, but he could be overlooked in a crowd. The church teaches that Jesus was God incarnate, the Word made flesh, but Rome could kill him with no compunction whatsoever. The church and the experience of millions of people through time teaches that on the third day He arose from the grave. Those outside the church can assert that it just

doesn't take them very long to look at a horseshoe, but to assert that it's all wishful thinking is to discount both the record of history, which documents that "Jesus something from somewhere up north" existed, and the experience of millions of people world wide who testify, just as John did, to the reality and accuracy of the accounts of Jesus.

Our very existence may depend on the nature of something called the cosmological constant. Our proteins may be wise enough to change their shape without our being aware of it. The fact that we don't understand or acknowledge generally the realities behind our existence does not change them – it simply reflects our limited understanding. If we're going to function in this world, we have to have a baseline amount of confidence in our abilities and understanding of how the world works, but it must be balanced by the humble admission

that we DON'T actually understand everything. One of the ways God teaches us humility is by handing us a hot horseshoe, just when we are holding forth as a know-it-all, when we are at our most self-assured and confident in our own abilities.

In this “Jesus something from somewhere up north”, there was what Celtic Christianity calls a “thin place”, a place through which we can look to see the limits of our understanding, and from which we can experience the reality behind the stained glass. This “Jesus something from somewhere up north” is a porthole in our cruise ship through which we can see the great ocean speeding by. Not everyone will look, but for those who do, such a glimpse shocks and awes those who have been given that opportunity and grants to them true humility.

Here is that reality, as I glimpse it: if the cosmological constant were even one millionth of a percent

greater or lesser, the universe we live in wouldn't have formed and we wouldn't be here. If the sun's energy output were a tiny bit different, we would have broiled or frozen before we could have evolved the ability to think about it. If the ratio of matter to anti-matter in the universe was only slightly different, the whole shebang would have blown up eons ago. It is almost as if from the very instant of the big bang, the universe was preparing itself for the presence of life on a tiny planet around an insignificant star. You can believe that happened by chance if you want. I can't. It's just too improbable. I believe it happened because some force, call it, oh...God...willed it so.

But that's not enough! Being convinced that the universe was called forth by a God so great that He is beyond our ability to describe isn't enough. The other piece we need is to be convinced that this God cares

about us, right down to the least of us. This is the piece that's lost on so many today. We live in an objectified, secular world. By virtue of our decision to be respectful of all beliefs we teeter on seeing religious understanding to be a personal opinion. Jesus is the hot horseshoe that forces each of us to take a position. You can be a professing Christian and assert your belief in Jesus. You can say it's all a load of dingo's kidneys and wishful thinking, but you have to take some position on Jesus.

This is what I urge you to think about this Advent. Jesus is coming into the world. What does that mean for you?

AMEN

Benediction

Rejoice always, pray without ceasing, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus for you. Do not quench the Spirit. Do not despise the words of prophets, but test everything; hold fast to what is good; abstain from every form of evil.

May the God of peace himself sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ. The one who calls you is faithful, and he will do this.

1 Thessalonians 5:16-24

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