

These comments present one interpretation of today's readings; other interpretations may be possible. Comments are best read with the readings.

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Isaiah 62:6-12

NRSV

The people of Israel have returned to Jerusalem, to a ravished land (although some commentators date this passage to the Exile in Babylon.) The people feel that God has ceased to care for them. The prophet writes of Jerusalem rising out of the ashes of destruction. In vv. 1-6 he has foretold a new Jerusalem rebuilt with the help of foreigners, increased fidelity to God, and an everlasting covenant with him, recognition by all peoples that God has blessed Israel, and a new *marriage* between God and his people.

Now the prophet speaks of “sentinels”, watchmen on the walls, whose role is no longer to warn of approaching enemies, but rather to keep reminding God of his promises until he “establishes Jerusalem and makes it renowned throughout the earth” (v. 7). God has promised truly (“by his right hand”, v. 8) and in his power (“mighty arm”) that he will no longer give their harvests to their enemies (as punishment for the disobedience of Israel.) (Leviticus 26:14-16 says: “If you will not me ... you shall sow your seed in vain, for your enemies will eat it.” In Exodus 6:6, when God asked Moses to lead the Exodus, he said “I will redeem you with an outstretched arm and with mighty acts of judgement.”.)

Instead, in the new Jerusalem, harvests will be theirs and they will be joyful and praise the Lord for them. It will be like an everlasting *Sukkot*, the Feast of Tabernacles, the most joyous festival of the year. (Tabernacles (booths) were set up in the fields during harvest, so *Sukkot* is like Harvest Thanksgiving.)

The last three verses recall the excitement of Isaiah 40:1-11, “Comfort, O comfort my people”: “prepare the way”, “lift up an ensign”. Salvation (restoration) will come; there will be compensation (“recompense”) for suffering. V. 12 lists the titles of the new Jerusalem. No longer will the people feel forsaken by their God, because he will again seek them out. Sorrowing will give way to salvation. God will be seen to love Israel again.

Psalms 97

NRSV

This is a hymn celebrating God's kingship. It emphasizes God's supremacy as Lord of the earth. “The Lord is king”, i.e. he has won the battle for world kingship over the forces of chaos. May the whole earth rejoice! Vv. 2-5 are a *theophany*, a description of how God has appeared as he has visited earth: in a cloud and in a burning bush during the Exodus, etc. He rules with righteousness and justice. He is “Lord of all the earth” (v. 5).

Note the three occurrences of the word “all” in vv. 6-9, emphasizing God's omnipotence. V. 7a says that those who worship other gods (“images”, “idols”) will

realize their error. Other gods, recognize God's supremacy! Then v. 8: the people of Israel rejoice in his justice. Vv. 10-12 tell us the kind of rule God exercises. Those who “hate evil” are faithful to him; he delivers them from the ways of those opposed to him, and escape their oppression. The righteous, the godly, are joyful and “give thanks” to him, praise him.

Titus 3:4-7

NRSV

In vv. 1-3, Titus is asked to remind the members of the Christian community of their duties within society: obey civil authorities, be ready to perform good works, speak evil of no one, avoid quarrelling, be gentle, and show courtesy – to all people. Remind them that they were once “led astray, slaves to various passions and pleasures”, as non-believers are.

Now the author tells them why. When Jesus, who exhibited these fine qualities, came, “he saved us” (v. 5), not because we had done good (godly) things, but due to his compassion. He restored our relationship with God (which we had lost through failing to follow God's ways), through “the water of rebirth” (v. 5), (i.e. baptism, which washes away sin and is the start of a new era in our lives) and through the Holy Spirit. This was God's freely-given gift (“grace”, v. 7). Why did Christ do this? So that we might be adopted by God (“heirs”), to share in his kingdom for ever.

Luke 2:(1-7),8-20

NRSV

In Vv. 1-7, Joseph and Mary have travelled from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to be registered as resident aliens, not being Roman citizens. Joseph being descended from David, they had to appear in the city of David, Bethlehem. While they were there, staying in the barn on the lower floor of the inn, Jesus was born in a manger. He was wrapped in cloths, as was any infant of the time.

In vv. 8-14, we learn the meaning of Jesus' birth. Those who hear the pronouncement by the angel are shepherds, lowly people. David too was a shepherd; in Luke, Jesus comes to the poor, the lowly. The message of Christ's birth is indeed a joyful one - for all. V. 11 mentions our great claims as to who Jesus is: Saviour, Messiah and Lord. As Saviour, he restores us to wholeness, rescues us from sin and alienation from God. In Jesus, God is present with sinners and saves us from destructive self-isolation from union with him, in a nurturing community. As Messiah, he inaugurates the era of heavenly peace: the end-time has begun. As Lord, he is God come in human form. The kingdom is for all those whom God has chosen (v. 14b).

The shepherds, rough, unkempt and ritually unclean, respond eagerly to the news, and find Joseph and Mary, and Jesus lying in the manger (or *feed-trough*.) (Jesus is for all people, and is their sustenance.) They tell Mary and Joseph what the angel has told them: amazing news! People expected a Messiah to appear at some distant time, but not now. Mary (v. 19) reflects on “these words” deeply, struggling with them in the context of her faith.