

Look, Shiny!



Lectionary Texts For

December 3, 2017 (First Sunday in Advent)

Texts in Brief

My dog ate my Bible!

FIRST READING

Isaiah 64:1–9

The prophet, on behalf of the exiled people of Jerusalem, is nostalgic for the time when God has intervened on behalf of the Jews. He also is lamenting the apparent absence of God from the exiles, which, he deems, is because of their sinfulness.

PSALM

Psalms 80:1–7, 17–19

This psalm is structured like most psalms of lament. First there is a celebration of the grandeur and enduring grace of God. Second, the problems of the psalmist's

people are laid out. Third, there's the request for God to help. And whether God is angry about the prayers of the people or at the people themselves, divine anger is noted by the author.

SECOND READING

1 Corinthians 1:3–9

Paul writes to the Christians in Corinth, setting an example of thanksgiving to God for enduring grace, and reminding them that their own gifts and abilities are first given by God.

GOSPEL

Mark 13:24–37

Jesus warns his followers to stay alert, to be aware of the distractions of false prophets, and not to fall into such distractions or complacency while waiting for his return after his inevitable crucifixion.

Bible, Decoded

Breaking down scripture in plain language

Grace – In the context of these texts, grace is equated to enduring patience and forgiveness, as exhibited by God toward God's people, who screw up. A Lot.

Lord of Hosts – This refers to a ruler over either earthly or heavenly armies or multitudes. It's meant to affirm God's authority and power and essentially to remind the readers of the text who is in charge (hint: not them).

Clay – The people of Israel are the fundamental elements (in this case, clay) that God uses to make into what they become as people. It's also a reference back to the

story of Adam (the first man) who was made out of the same clay. So in a sense, it's an allusion to the fact that, though we're made of earthly elements, we're "inspired" or breathed into life by something not of this world.

Son of Man - This is actually a pretty controversial phrase found in the gospels. Whereas elsewhere, Jesus often is referred to as the "Son of God," this title could be pointing particularly to his humanity, or even his intimate connection with people and the human experience.

Points to Ponder

First Thoughts

There are some interesting themes that jump out among all of these texts. First, the authors are speaking to the people of Israel (the Jewish people) about being without a center, a sense of place. They're neither there anymore, but not yet here. There is a sense of being lost and wandering. In the case of the text in Mark, the loss actually hasn't happened yet, but it will on two levels. For one, they'll lose the temple at the center of Jerusalem that they've been so passionately admiring. But also, they'll lose Jesus, their new leader, all too soon.

So there's this tension of dealing with loss, but also calling for holding out hope for things to improve. It's hard to be hopeful when all you can think about is what you've lost or will soon lose. And yet, the audience in each of the texts is encouraged to be thankful, not necessarily for what is right in front of them, but for what has been provided for them in the past, and to parlay that gratitude into trust that it can happen, yet again.

Digging Deeper

Mining for what really matters . . . and gold

Knowing some context behind this Isaiah scripture can help us understand what's going on. At this point, King Cyrus has beaten the Babylonians, making a way for the Jews to return to the promised land from Babylon. The thing is, the people now living in the territory to be claimed by them as the nation of Israel feel differently. They don't exactly want to uproot and move so these people they don't know can take over their homes. This results in a delay in the establishment of the promised land, leaving the Jews in exile. Isaiah attributes this misfortune to the softening, distracted spiritual lives of his people, which has caused God to turn from them. So he wants them to get right with God in order to get to return to their homeland.

The people who are the audience in this psalm have lost focus too. The author senses God's absence, so God doesn't show up when they need a hand. But as has happened before, the psalmist assures them that God will return to care for them, despite their screw-ups. The author concludes with a request, asking God to return and make things right again.

In Paul's letter to the Corinthian Christians, he suggests that something is causing them to lose their way. Maybe they're falling into the cultural ways and values of the community they're in. Maybe the Christian community they're supposed to build up isn't coming along as quickly as was hoped. Maybe the rejection is discouraging them. Regardless, he senses trouble. So in his greeting to them, he's modeling the sort of thankfulness and faithfulness he expects from them, while also

reminding them that all the good in their lives is not of their own doing, but rather is a gift from God.

In the Markan Gospel passage, Jesus knows his followers were ogling the temple in Jerusalem, but he warns them that such love is fleeting, and that it will all eventually crumble. He draws a parallel to his own departure from their midst when he'll be crucified, maybe to remind them not to hold on too tightly to anything physical in their midst. Distractions abound, for both them and those they want to teach. But he urges them to stay alert and to be mindful of the false allure of material, superficial things that draw them off their path.

Heads Up

Connecting the text to our world

These scriptures make me think of Doug, the dog in the movie *Up*. His owner affixed a speaking device to his collar, translating his every “dog thought” into English. And he says a lot of stuff you’d expect a dog to say, like “I don’t know you yet, but I love you!” Doug also struggles to follow a thought through once he starts explaining something, inevitably interrupted mid-sentence by yet another squirrel.

We all end up chasing squirrels now and then or, if you’re like me, a dozen times an hour when the latest alert pops up on your phone. There’s even a term for getting lost down topical rabbit holes online; it’s called WWILFing, which stands for “What Was I Looking For?”

There are more existential rabbit holes for us too, like when we get so consumed in the minutiae and stress of daily life that we forget to slow down and be

grateful for what we already have in our lives. Sometimes it takes stopping and resting in silence for a few minutes, or offering a silent word of thanks to regain perspective and reclaim our spiritual centers.

This advent—and every Christmas season, really—there are even more distractions than usual. On top of shopping and decorating, there is the seemingly endless stream of social events and end-of-year work items, nagging at our waning minutes. It's so incredibly easy to turn around and feel utterly lost, without a center, without purpose. And a life without a sense of direction and purpose often points to a life that has lost touch with God.

Prayer for the Week

God, it's happening again. There's more shiny stuff and squirrels distracting me from a connection with You than ever. What Was I Looking For? Remind me, then help me find it. Thanks.

Popping Off

Art/music/video and other cool stuff that relate to the text

Up (movie, 2009)

“A New Theory of Distraction,” from *The New Yorker* (article, June 16, 2015) <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/a-new-theory-of-distraction>

“Daily Riches: Mindfulness,” by Ruth Haley Barton and Richard Rohr (blog, January 25, 2015) <https://richerbyfar.com/2015/01/25/daily-riches-mindfulness-ruth-haley-barton-richard-rohr-2/>