

**Sermon Notes from the Church's Ministry Among Jewish People**  
Third Sunday of Advent – Year A

**RCL Readings** – Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146:5-10; James 5:7-10; Matthew 11:2-11

**ACNA Readings** – Isaiah 35:1-10; Psalm 146; James 5:7-20; Matthew 11:2-19

**Common Theme.** Traditionally, the Third Sunday in Advent promotes joy or rejoicing and has often been devoted to the Virgin Mary. That said, the RCL's use of Matthew 4 seems disconnected from anything except the general Advent theme of fasting and preparation. The ACNA's Gospel text is more appropriate to the rejoicing theme and also links neatly with the collect and captures joy in the results of the Messiah's arrival. The Isaiah text and Psalm 146 are filled with the rejoicing of the redeemed. The text from James can perhaps capture the hope of the faithful, patient disciple who awaits the return of the Lord but is homiletically more awkward. So, to this preacher, a multi-text, thematic sermon would be a fruitful challenge. The theme of rejoicing using Isaiah 35, Psalm 146, and Matthew 11 is the possible combination. James 5, taken alone, is appropriate for a general Advent theme providing lessons in behavior for hard times and is therefore full of material for reflection and repentance in anticipation of the Lord's coming.

**Isaiah 35:1-20.** Isaiah's magnificent, poetic prophecy intermingles threat and hope. Today's portion is a hopeful one that will long await fulfillment because the threats were not heeded. Following a long soliloquy chastising Israel and revealing the trauma that lies ahead for turning to Egypt rather than trusting the Lord, the prophet records the Lord's judgment on the Gentile nations in chapter 34. The preacher will do well to review all these texts to build the context of the promises in chapter 35.

A signal phrase for the portion is the conclusion in verse 10: "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return..." This text begs the preacher to show the congregation how scripture exists in a historical context while simultaneously foretelling a future event. The fulfilled prophecy of Israel's return from Babylon is a pale picture of all the ransomed saints, Jewish and Gentile, who will be redeemed when the Messiah arrives. The prophecy was clearly fulfilled when Israel returned from Babylon but also foretells the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan of salvation.

A worship song – "Therefore the Redeemed of the Lord" – was written from these concluding verses in the 1970s that would be appropriate for use in corporate worship.

**Psalm 146.** The Psalter concludes with the hallelujahs of its final five hymns. Although it has some lessons, its essence celebrates the Lord's care for humankind and especially those in need. The psalm is primarily praise to be offered to the Lord. Tempting as it is in politically charged times to remind the congregation "not to put their trust in princes", that is probably not its highest and best use. If read responsively or antiphonally, it is best by whole verse as it is irregular with many thoughts completed rather than repeated by the second half of the verse.

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**James 5:7-10 or 7-20.** Extracting verses 7-10 from the larger paragraph that ends with verse 12 works because it ends with the faithful patience of the prophets who awaited the fulfilling of their declarations. That said, the preacher can emphasize prophetic hope in verse 10 by finishing verse 11. The age is fickle and the example of the “steadfastness of Job” is almost novel and worthy of emphasis. Verse 9 gives equally unpopular guidance, that the knowledge of God’s observing judgment accompanies every moment of our lives and therefore gives an alternative good reason for steadfast hope. The truth that human nature requires accountability, as well as hope and promise, is becoming essential in a world where temporal comfort, safety, and admiration are increasingly the limit of human aspiration.

Verse 12 remains marvelous advice that echoes Jesus’ teaching, but it eludes this writer as it does many commentators as to how it fits in the text. Find a humorous way to skip it.

Verses 13-20 comprise the practical expression of faith that produces hope. And hope is one source of rejoicing. The advice about praying, singing praises, calling the elders in time of need, confession, intercession for one another, and the work of bringing the fallen away back to the Lord provide the most practical of applications for how we live out faith and hope. Turning away from our concerns for self and turning to the needs of others is the Lord’s counter-intuitive way of increasing our own hope and faith.

**Matthew 11:2-19.** The Baptist found himself in the less-than-hopeful prison of Herod Antipas because of his faithful condemning judgment on adultery. Jesus was not quite the Messiah he was expecting, although he knew Jesus was the Messiah is an example of doubt in the faithful. It is a necessary spiritual challenge to preach. Jesus’ reassurances all arise from the pen of Isaiah (9, 35, 53, 29, and 26). This is one more evidence of the links between the New and Old Testament that should never be broken by the preacher. It is a great opportunity to emphasize each of the characteristics of the Messiah by taking the listener with him to each of the texts. Biblical theology is a two Covenant, two Testament theology.

Jesus’ tribute to John demonstrates the requirements of steadfastness and hope for the disciple living in a fallen world. Trouble was normative for Jews from sometime before the Exile. The writers of the New Testament, almost all Jews, are experienced with oppression and trouble. The preacher can bring that trouble forward for his listeners and provide an application of hope. John’s situation provides an empathetic connection to the derision contemporary followers of Jesus have begun to experience. Biblical righteousness and truth have become the pathway on which to carry a metaphorical cross. And for the current time, the remedy of hope comes through being Jesus’ instrument to bring hope to the blind, the lame, the lepers, the poor, and those who need good news. It is probably beyond the faith of any of our hearers to pray for the raising of the dead until Messiah returns, but we can increase our own steadfast joy by comforting the grieving. Usually, we think ‘giving is better than receiving’ is for times of comfort; scripture teaches no such doctrine.

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**Jewish Roots.** No impressive aha moments exist between Judaism and Christianity, or even Talmud and New Testament in these texts. The consistent message that arches over both testaments is the consistency of God's character, expectations, and resolve to complete his intentions for his creation and his plan of salvation.

There is one interesting option in the Isaiah text that requires some extra work. We can say that Jesus is our hope, and our congregations can agree, but it is unlikely to affect the way they live out their faith. Isaiah 35 describes the Highway of Holiness (vv. 8-10). It is consistent that the Lord is with and empowers those who are holy. Many modern believers have not matured in discipleship because they do not trust (or even invite) the Holy Spirit into the struggles to be holy. Even holiness is reduced to a list of ethical behaviors. From Exodus forward, the Lord asks for two kinds of holiness: a people whose identity is grounded in him and seen by the world in their behavior (i.e. Shabbat) and abiding by the guidelines of behavior (ethics) of teaching like the Ten Commandments and the Beatitudes.

When a disciple fully grasps that when he/she receives the Holy Spirit at salvation, they are promised the help of the Spirit. But they must ask and they must seek, as a matter of priority, to be the people of God. It is not enough to add a belief in Jesus to all the other priorities in their lives.

The Holy Highway is the highway of hope. That hope is only available as we submit to the disciplines of following Jesus. Through these disciplines, we preserve the hope within us of his sure return. Only then do we have the confidence that we are “the redeemed of the Lord who...receive joy everlasting.”

**About the author.** The Rev. Canon Daryl Fenton assumed the role of executive director for CMJ in Israel in 2019, after having served in the same capacity for CMJ's USA branch. Cn. Daryl previously served as canon to Archbishop Robert Duncan of the Anglican Church in North America, overseeing mission relationships. He also served as canon and chief operating officer for the Anglican Communion Network, a founding organization of the ACNA. He continues to serve the current archbishop, the Most Rev. Foley Beach, as Canon for the Middle East. Daryl is married to Sandy. They have two grown children, as well as three grandchildren. The Fentons reside in Jerusalem, Israel.