[Isaiah 35:1-10](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=3#hebrew_reading)

[Psalm 146:5-10](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=3#psalm_reading)

[Luke 1:46b-55](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=3#psalm_oth_reading)

[Matthew 11:2-11](https://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/texts.php?id=3#gospel_reading)

THE NEW TESTAMENT Sermon for 12/15/2019

By Rev. Dr. Don Algeo

In our reading from Luke's gospel this morning, Luke transcribes a song that Mary is said to have sung while she was visiting her cousin, Elizabeth. Her cousin was pregnant with a baby while Mary was also pregnant with Jesus. When Mary enters the house, Elizabeth feels the child leap in her wound, and she cries out to Mary, “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.” And it's at that point that Mary recites a poem.

We've all read and heard that song many times, and once again we heard it this morning. One of the noteworthy things about that poem is how full it is of Old Testament thinking and imagery.

*His mercy is on those who fear Him  
From generation to generation*, Mary says, making God's mercy somehow a response to the attitude of those who worship him.

*He has shown strength with His arm;  
He has scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.  
He has put down the mighty from their thrones,  
And exalted the lowly s*he says, and we picture a mighty warrior God, casting down the powerful from their thrones, and replacing them with others of His own choosing.

And she concludes by emphasizing that this is all concerned only with the nation of Israel. It is what God is doing for Israel, and in accordance with the ancient promises made to that special people:

*He has helped His servant Israel,  
In remembrance of His mercy,  
As He spoke to our fathers,  
To Abraham and to his seed forever.”*

In Mary's mind, and in the minds of the other characters in Luke's nativity account, the great blessing they were participating in was the fulfillment of the promises made to the Jewish nation as revealed in their own holy scriptures, interpreted to them by their rabbis, the Pharisees and other teachers’ scripture. By the power of God's mighty arm, Israel was to be restored to its rightful place as preeminent among nations, to remain there as long as they showed proper fear and reverence for the Lord. The baby still in Mary's womb would be the long predicted and awaited Hope of Israel, its Messiah, its new-borne king. That's why Mary was exultant.

After completing his nativity account, in his third chapter, Luke leaps many years forward in time and shows us that baby in Elizabeth's womb now grown into that extraordinarily strange and powerfully charismatic desert prophet known through the whole countryside as John the Baptizer.

The message John is preaching in the wilderness has galvanized the whole country of Israel. It's a message of the immanence of disaster and judgment, and the necessity for immediate repentance. The terrible strength of God's arm described in Mary's song is now about to be exercised against the high and mighty, today, perhaps, certainly tomorrow or the next day. The axe is laid against the roots of the proud trees, the wrath of God is at the door, the chaff is being harvested that will be winnowed and thrown into the unquenchable fire. The Day of the Lord has finally dawned, and it will be a day of fire and destruction, of upheaval and despair, of justice and judgment.

That was John's message, and it was delivered with such force and conviction that many at the time felt that John himself might be the agent of that change, the Messiah so long prophesied.

And it is at this time of deeply national anxiety and uncertainty, comprised equally of glorious hope and dreadful expectation, all founded in and based on and soaked through and through with the attitudes and imagery and convictions of Israel's 2000 year history, as preserved in the collection of writings we now call the Old Testament....it was into this national apocalyptic fervor that one day a young man from Nazareth appeared on the banks of the Jordan river, that he stepped into its waters, and allowed himself to be baptized by this fanatical Doomsday prophet, John.

And all four Gospel writers tell us that John saw something in this young man that led him to believe that he, Jesus, was in fact God's chosen instrument to bring all these terrible things about.

And now we travel forward a couple of years, to the time of the conversation recorded in our Gospel reading for today. John has been thrown into a dungeon, a horrible fate for this freedom-loving man of the desert. He has no reason to believe he will ever taste freedom again. In all likelihood – as in fact happened – he will die in this prison.

And he has heard stories about that young man he baptized in the Jordan, and by whom he had been so impressed that he dared to believe this might be the One, the one who would fulfill all those ancient prophesies and expectations. He’s heard that he performs signs and wonders, and that his message is one of hope for the poor and the sick and the oppressed.

But what he has not heard is anything about armies being raised, about the shackles of Roman rule being broken, about the mighty right arm of God beginning to bring to ruin the enemies and oppressors of the nation of Israel. Healing the blind and lame is fine in its place; but the long-awaited Messiah would be a conquering warrior, not a preachy faith-healer.

So John sends his students to see Jesus, and to ask him whether he is truly the one, the one John had preached about, the one who would lay the axe to the root and burn the oppressors with fire from heaven. And what does Jesus say to them? Let's read it again:

*Go and tell John what you hear and see:  
  
11:5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.*

You hear that? Nothing about armies and conquest, nothing about throwing off the yoke of the Romans, nothing about elevating Israel to a position of prominence amongst the other nations.

And then Jesus adds the next thought, his final word to John: *And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me.*Blessed are you, John, if you can still, knowing what I am and what I am not, blessed are you if you can still believe in me.

And that helps us to understand, I think, what Jesus meant when, after the messengers from John had left, Jesus turns to the people around him and, after praising John as the greatest and best the human race can produce, says that, nonetheless, the least in the Kingdom of God is greater than John.

His point is not that they are smarter than John, or stronger than John, or better than John. His point is that all who came before Christ, including even his own family, had not yet received the full revelation of the nature and reality of God, the revelation of the Cross, the revelation that sacrificial love is the heart of God.

We do not have an Old Testament God of vengeance; we have a New Testament God of forgiveness. We do not have an Old Testament God of conquest; we have a New Testament God of service. We do not have an Old Testament God of national justice or individual damnation; we have a New Testament God of universal love and universal salvation.

And as we approach Christmas Eve, perhaps it would be wise to remind ourselves of that revelation, the revelation that began in a manger in Bethlehem, and concluded on a hill called Golgotha. Perhaps, like John, we need to be reminded that the full revelation of God teaches us not only about God, but also about ourselves, about how far we all fall short of the mercy, the forgiveness, the understanding, the humility and the love manifested on the Cross.

And so that is our prayer for this morning. We pray that we not be scandalized by the truth about Jesus and the truth about God. We pray to remember that Jesus came to teach us the ways of heaven, not the ways of the world. We pray that we not be scandalized when we are reminded, not of how far we have come but of how far we have to go, when we are asked to reflect on and confess our failings instead of publicizing our successes, when we are asked to forgive rather than condemn our enemies, to be patient and steady rather than demanding and indignant, to accept on faith what we cannot see, to trust in God's unfailing and unending love, even as we suffer on our own personal cross, because that's what Jesus did, and we pray in his name.