

The first reading comes from the book of Isaiah

Isaiah prophesied during one of the worst times in the history of Israel. The Israelites had become so corrupt God was going to remove them out of His sight. He raised up the Assyrian army to be an unmerciful, barbaric, ruthless, an unstoppable war machine. Their military tactics are still applauded today by those who understand the art of war.

Assyria began as a small trading community and grew to become the greatest empire in the ancient world prior to the conquests of Alexander the Great and, after him, the Roman Empire. While the Assyrians' administrative skills were impressive; it was their skill in warfare.

The Assyrian war machine was the most efficient military force in the ancient world up until the fall of the empire in 612 BCE. The secret to its success was a professionally trained standing army, iron weapons, advanced engineering skills, effective tactics, and, most importantly, a complete ruthlessness which came to characterize the Assyrians to their neighbors and subjects and still attaches itself to the reputation of Assyria in the modern day.

God called them from their distant land to come and destroy the Jews living in the north, and take them away from their homeland. Isaiah was living in Judah, in the city of Jerusalem during a time when King Uzziah had died.

He prophesied about the Assyrians who would destroy the northern kingdom, they were also good to come to Jerusalem but God would deliver them. But he also told them that eventually the city will be destroyed and captured by the Babylonians, and that a Persian ruler named Cyrus would release the Jews from captivity. Isaiah prophesied more about the Messiah than any other book in the Old Testament.

He also described in great detail the blessings of the future kingdom of the Messiah. His coming would be as a lion bringing the day of God's wrath, but he would also first come as a savior who would die for the sins of the people. This was Isaiah's message, the humility and beauty of the Savior.

A Green Shoot from Jesse's Stump

11

1-5 A green Shoot will sprout from Jesse's stump,
from his roots a budding Branch.

The life-giving Spirit of God will hover over him,
the Spirit that brings wisdom and understanding,
The Spirit that gives direction and builds strength,

the Spirit that instills knowledge and Fear-of-God.

Fear-of-God

will be all his joy and delight.

He won't judge by appearances,

won't decide on the basis of hearsay.

He'll judge the needy by what is right,

render decisions on earth's poor with justice.

His words will bring everyone to awed attention.

A mere breath from his lips will topple the wicked.

Each morning he'll pull on sturdy work clothes and boots,

and build righteousness and faithfulness in the land.

A Living Knowledge of God

6-9

The wolf will romp with the lamb,

the leopard sleep with the kid.

Calf and lion will eat from the same trough,

and a little child will tend them.

Cow and bear will graze the same pasture,

their calves and cubs grow up together,

and the lion eat straw like the ox.

The nursing child will crawl over rattlesnake dens,

the toddler stick his hand down the hole of a serpent.

Neither animal nor human will hurt or kill

on my holy mountain.

The whole earth will be brimming with knowing God-Alive,

a living knowledge of God ocean-deep, ocean-wide.

10 On that day, Jesse's Root will be raised high, posted as a rallying banner for the peoples. The nations will all come to him. His headquarters will be glorious.



Assyrian Empire - 824 B.C.

Assyrian Empire - 671 B.C.

Black Sea

Caspian Sea

Mediterranean Sea

Red Sea

Persian Gulf

Kingdom of Urartu
(before 712 B.C.)

Phrygian Kingdom

Lydian Kingdom

Greek City States

The Egyptian Kingdom
(before 671 B.C.)

Judah

Scythians

Cimmerians

Libyans

Ammonium

Illyrians

Paeonians

Thracians

Macedon

Thasos

Greek Colonies

Byzantium (Greek)

Chalcedon (Greek)

Tieum (Greek)

Sinope (Greek)

Trapezus (Greek)

Abydos

Cyzicus

Astacus (Greek)

Gordium

Ancyra

Kanish

Marqash

Tushpa

Epirus

Corinth

Athens

Sparta

Lydian Kingdom

Sardis

Miletus

Celaenae

Phaselis (Greek)

Kanish

Tarsus

Samal

Carchemish

Haran

Gozan

Nisibis

Musasir

Dur Sharrukm

Arbela

Nineveh

Calah

Ashur

Arrapakha

Ecbatana

Cyprus

Salamis

Paphos

Arvad

Karkar

Hamath

Tadmor

Anatho

Byblos

Sidon

Tyre

Damascus

Opis

Sippar

Babylon

Borsippa

Cuthah

Kish

Nippur

Susa

Erech

Ur

Samaria

Jerusalem

Eltekeh

Ashkelon

Raphia

Pelusium

Judah

Sela

Dumah

Sais

Tanis

Bubastis

Memphis

On

Heracleopolis

Sinai Peninsula

The Egyptian Kingdom

Akhetaton

Siut

Abydos

Thebes

Jeb

Letter of Paul to the Romans, the longest and doctrinally most significant of St. Paul the Apostle's New Testament writings, probably composed at Corinth in about AD 57; it was addressed to the Christian Church at Rome, whose congregation Paul hoped to visit for the first time on his way to Spain. The letter has been intensely studied since early Christian times and was the basis of Martin Luther's teaching on justification by faith alone.

Romans 15 The Message (MSG)

15 1-2 Those of us who are strong and able in the faith need to step in and lend a hand to those who falter, and not just do what is most convenient for us.

Strength is for service, not status. Each one of us needs to look after the good of the people around us, asking ourselves, "How can I help?"

3-6 That's exactly what Jesus did. He didn't make it easy for himself by avoiding people's troubles, but waded right in and helped out. "I took on the troubles of the troubled," is the way Scripture puts it. Even if it was written in Scripture long ago, you can be sure it's written for us. God wants the combination of his steady, constant calling and warm, personal counsel in Scripture to come to characterize us, keeping us alert for whatever he will do next. May our dependably steady and warmly personal God develop maturity in you so that you get along with each other as well as Jesus gets along with us all. Then we'll be a choir—not our voices only, but our very lives singing in harmony in a stunning anthem to the God and Father of our Master Jesus!

7-13 So reach out and welcome one another to God's glory. Jesus did it; now you do it! Jesus, staying true to God's purposes, reached out in a special way to the Jewish insiders so that the old ancestral promises would come true for them. As a result, the non-Jewish outsiders have been able to experience mercy and to show appreciation to God. Just think of all the Scriptures that will come true in what we do! For instance:

Then I'll join outsiders in a hymn-sing;
I'll sing to your name!

And this one:

Outsiders and insiders, rejoice together!

And again:

People of all nations, celebrate God!

All colors and races, give hearty praise!

And Isaiah's word:

There's the root of our ancestor Jesse,

breaking through the earth and growing tree tall,

Tall enough for everyone everywhere to see and take hope!

Oh! May the God of green hope fill you up with joy, fill you up with peace, so that your believing lives, filled with the life-giving energy of the Holy Spirit, will brim over with hope!

The Year of Matthew

“As the opening book of the New Testament, the early church gave Matthew’s gospel deep respect for centuries. It came from the pen of an apostle and reflected an intimate acquaintance with the Jewish customs of Jesus. In the early second century, Papias, the bishop of Hierapolis, said Matthew was the first to record Jesus’ story. Augustine elevated Matthew above the other canonical Gospels and for a thousand years Matthew’s priority was taken for granted”

“Matthew offers stories that set his gospel apart, such as the familiar Christmas story of the Magi bringing gifts to Jesus and Herod the Great’s plan to kill this new “king.” The compelling ethics of the Sermon on the Mount — a compendium of Jesus’ wise and parabolic sayings — has been studied as a gateway into Jesus’ innermost thoughts about loving God and discipleship.

Matthew’s audience was primarily Jewish, so he addressed issues close to the Jewish heart. Jesus respected the law and claimed to fulfill it. Matthew’s cadence flows between teaching and action. Scripture continues to be fulfilled, and God’s plan is not frustrated despite Jesus’ death on the cross. Jesus rises from the tomb, thereby vindicating his messiahship through the resurrection.”

“Because Matthew exhibits a keen interest on matters of Jewish law and custom, many scholars believe this gospel originated either in Palestine or Syria. When Papias said Matthew wrote in the Hebrew “dialect”, many suggest he was not referring to the Hebrew language but a Hebrew writing style. Matthew shows no clear signs of being translated from Hebrew to Greek, but indications of “Hebraic style” abound. This gospel, then, may have come from a Jewish Christian group anchored within a larger Jewish community, such as Syrian Antioch.”

Matthew 3 is the third chapter of the Gospel of Matthew in the New Testament. It is the first chapter dealing with the ministry of Jesus with events taking place some three decades after the close of the infancy narrative related in the previous two chapters. The focus of this chapter is on the preaching of John the Baptist and the Baptism of Jesus.^[1]

For the first time since Matthew 1:1 there are clear links with the Gospel of Mark. Many scholars are certain a good portion of this chapter is a reworking of Mark 1. The chapter also parallels Luke 3, also believed to be based on Mark 1. A number of passages shared by Luke and Matthew, but not found in Mark, are commonly ascribed to the hypothetical source 'Q'.

Thunder in the Desert!

3 1-2 While Jesus was living in the Galilean hills, John, called “the Baptizer,” was preaching in the desert country of Judea. His message was simple and austere, like his desert surroundings: “Change your life. God’s kingdom is here.”

3 John and his message were authorized by Isaiah’s prophecy:

Thunder in the desert!

Prepare for God’s arrival!

Make the road smooth and straight!

4-6 John dressed in a camel-hair habit tied at the waist by a leather strap. He lived on a diet of locusts and wild field honey. People poured out of Jerusalem, Judea, and the Jordanian countryside to hear and see him in action. There at the Jordan River those who came to confess their sins were baptized into a changed life.

7-10 When John realized that a lot of Pharisees and Sadducees were showing up for a baptismal experience because it was becoming the popular thing to do, he exploded: “Brood of snakes! What do you think you’re doing slithering down here to the river? Do you think a little water on your snakeskins is going to make any difference? It’s your life that must change, not your skin! And don’t think you can pull rank by claiming Abraham as father. Being a descendant of Abraham is neither here nor there. Descendants of Abraham are a dime a dozen. What counts is your life. Is it green and blossoming? Because if it’s deadwood, it goes on the fire.

11-12 “I’m baptizing you here in the river, turning your old life in for a kingdom life. The real action comes next: The main character in this drama—compared to him I’m a mere stagehand—will ignite the kingdom life within you, a fire within you, the Holy Spirit within you, changing you from the inside out. He’s going to clean house—make a clean sweep of your lives. He’ll place everything true in its proper place before God; everything false he’ll put out with the trash to be burned.”

[RCL]: Isaiah 11:1-10; Psalm 72:1-7, 18-19; Romans 15:4-13; Matthew 3:1-12