Worship Resources for November 15th, 2020—Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Judges 4:1-7 and Psalm 123; Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18 and Psalm 90:1-8 (9-11), 12; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Narrative Lectionary: God Calls Isaiah, Isaiah 6:1-8 (Luke 5:8-10)

As we near the end of the season after Pentecost, we have followed our ancestors in the faith from the family of Abraham and Sarah to the fourth generation, and then the people of Israel from Egypt to the Promised Land. In Judges 4:1-7, the people are faced oppression by King Jabin of Canaan. The narrator/editor of Judges determined this happened because the people did what was evil in the sight of the Lord (vs. 1) and did not choose as Joshua had called them to do in previous generations. However, Deborah, a prophetess and the judge of Israel, spoke to the commander of her army, Barak, that God would draw out the commander of Jabin’s army, Sisera, and deliver them into Barak’s hand. Even though the people may have turned from God, God has not turned from them, and still called prophets and leaders to guide them.

The psalmist calls for mercy from God on behalf of the people in Psalm 123. The people look to God the way those without power look to the one who has the power to bring change, for the people are oppressed. They’ve had enough of the people who look down on them, those who have not had to struggle.

The prophet Zephaniah pronounced judgment on the people in the second selection for the Hebrew scriptures. Written probably before Josiah became king of Judah and established reforms, the prophet only saw what lay ahead if the kings, priests, and people continued to worship other gods, made poor political alliances and ignored those on the margins among them. The day of the Lord has come, the prophet declared, and it is neither good nor bad, it is the consequence of the actions of the leaders and people who followed other gods and left the ways of God they were taught. Their worldly possessions, wealth, and resources could not save them—instead, the people would suffer. All they worked for would be taken from them. Zephaniah gave a harsh judgment, a reminder that the things of this world—wealth, possessions, worldly measures of success—would not save them. They are hinderances to God’s ways.

Psalm 90 (which was also part of the Revised Common Lectionary readings on October 25th) is a song reminding the people that God’s time is not our time. Human beings are like grass that grows in a day and then withers. A thousand years are like yesterday. God knows our way of life, and God knows our sins. The psalmist calls upon God to teach people to be wise, to count their days and understand how precious time is for human beings, before it is gone.

The Epistle reading closes out the last few weeks on 1 Thessalonians with 5:1-11. Paul wrote that the day of the Lord would come like a thief in the night, paraphrasing Jesus’ words in Matthew 24:43. Paul called upon the church in Thessalonica to stay alert, to “keep awake” and be “children of the day.” In other words, Paul called upon the church to live out their faith visibly, to be aware of signs of God’s return in our world and our lives in a new way. Paul reminded them that they are not destined for the wrath of God, but for salvation, and to live into this world in the ways of Christ. Paul urged them to build up and encourage each other as they waited for Christ’s return.

Jesus told a parable in Matthew 25:14-30. Commonly known as the Parable of the Talents, a landowner entrusts coins to his servants—to one he gave five talents, to one he gave two, and to the last he gave one. The first two invested the coins and made more, but the last buried his in the dirt. At the end, the landowner was pleased with the first two, and harshly judged the last one. But the last one called the landowner out for being a harsh man, reaping where he did not sow, harvesting what he did not plant. The man was afraid and buried the coin, but gave it back to the landowner. While a surface level reading shows us that if we do not risk, we are bound to lose, a deeper level shows us the cost of refusing to participate in unjust practices. Because Jesus told this parable right before his own arrest and death sentence, one might consider the cost that Jesus paid is the cost of standing against the ways of this world.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Call of the prophet Isaiah. In Isaiah 6:1-8, Isaiah beheld a vision of the heavenly throne room and the seraphim, the six-winged heavenly creatures who declared God’s holiness. Isaiah knew that he was a mere human, a sinner, unworthy of beholding God or even speaking before God. One of the seraphs touched a coal to Isaiah’s lips, signifying that Isaiah was pure, clean, free to speak before God. Then God asked, “Whom should I send? Who will go and speak for me?” and Isaiah answered, “Here I am.”

In Luke 5:8-10, Peter had witnessed the miracle of Jesus telling them to throw their nets over one more time for fish, even though they had fished all day, and miraculously filled their boats. Peter recognized that Jesus must be from God, and told Jesus to go away, for he was a sinner. However, Jesus, in verse 11, told Simon Peter that from now on he would fish for people.

God doesn’t give up. Even when we make promises and vows to God and fail to live up to them, God sends others to call us back to God’s ways. When we think we are not good enough, God calls us by name. When we set our own stumbling blocks in front of us, that we are not pure, that we are sinners—God declares us clean and calls us anyway. Judgment is for everyone, regardless of who we are. But do we turn back to God in the face of judgment, or do we give up? Do we repent and turn from our ways, or do we look to our possessions and wealth for security? Are we willing to risk everything in the face of injustice in this world to live into God’s ways, even if it means suffering and punishment in this world? What does it mean for us to be awake, to be ready, to live as children of God in a way that is visible to all?

Call to Worship (from Isaiah 6:1-8)

**Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord God of hosts,**

 **The whole earth is full of God’s glory.**

**Woe, we cry out, for we are not worthy,**

 **We are people of unclean lips.**

**Yet God holds the coal to our lips,**

 **God makes us worthy to speak.**

**When God asks, “Whom shall I send?”**

 **We say, “Send us, for we will go in Your name.”**

**Send us, O God, to speak Your truth,**

 **Send us, to live into Your ways.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we confess the brokenness of the world we live in. We confess that we at times hate our neighbors. We know we are called not to hate, but to love, and yet it is difficult for us. When others uphold unjust practices, when systemic racism is dismissed as a myth instead of revealed for the sin it is, we lament, O God. When homophobia, Islamophobia, and Antisemitism are practiced and encouraged by leaders among us, we cry out, O God. We hate evil. Nonetheless, call us away from hating one another. Call us instead to view our siblings, Your beloved children, as broken by sin. Remind us of the times we have been wrong, broken by sin, and have worked to correct our ways. Call us into the hard work of justice and mercy. Remind us, O God, that at times there are relationships that are more harmful than helpful, and to let them go without hate when they cannot be repaired. Remind us, O God, that Your love for us endures all things, believes all things, and hopes all things, and never ends. Help us, O God, in the brokenness of this world, to cling fast to love and love’s ways. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (1 Corinthians 13:4-8a, 13)

“Love is patient, love is kind, love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. Love does not insist on its own way. It is not irritable or resentful. It does not rejoice in wrongdoing, but rejoices in the truth. Love bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends. And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three, and the greatest of these is love.” Go love one another, and know that God’s love is with you, now and always. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty and Ancient of Days, we come before You as the year wanes. Guide us into living Your ways. In a spirit of gratitude, may we give thanks to You for all we have, for the bounty of the earth, for the living of these days. In a spirit of letting go, as the leaves fall in the northern hemisphere, may we let go of the regrets from this past year, the things left undone, the hurt from things broken beyond repair. In a spirit of planting something new, as bulbs are pressed into the ground before the frost, or in the southern hemisphere, as springtime emerges, may Your grace take root and blossom within us. May our hearts soften a bit like earth so that something wonderful may grow. May we extend more kindness and compassion than others feel necessary. Guide us in Your wisdom, at the turning of the year. Amen.