Worship Resources for November 8th, 2020—Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Joshua 24:1-3a, 15-25 and Psalm 78:1-7; Amos 5:18-24 and Psalm 70; 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18; Matthew 25:1-13

Narrative Lectionary: Jonah and God’s Mercy, Jonah 1:1-17, 3:1-10 (4:1-11) (Luke 18:13)

As we near the end of this season after Pentecost, we near the end of the journey of our ancestors of faith in the first selection from the Hebrew scriptures. We began with Abraham and Sarah, through their grandson Jacob and his family’s journey to Egypt, to the people’s journey from Egypt out of oppression into the wilderness, and lastly to the home God promised Abraham and Sarah. Joshua, having led the people since Moses’ death, across the Jordan River and into the struggles with the other peoples who lived there, asked the people to make a choice. For all they had been through, would they continue to worship the gods some of their ancestors worshiped, or adopt the gods of the peoples around them? Joshua declared that his household will serve the Lord their God, the one who spoke to Moses in the burning bush, the God who called Abraham and Sarah. The people declared their promises to worship God, but Joshua warned them: they must stop worshiping the other gods of the land around them. They must put away the idols they have kept. The people insisted they would serve only God, and Joshua made a covenant with them that day.

Portions of Psalm 78 were part of the lectionary readings on September 27th. In Psalm 78:1-7, the psalmist begins by calling the people to listen, for God is speaking. The psalmist speaks of parables and dark sayings of old, recalling the ancient stories that were passed on to the people. What God did for the people in the past must be told to a new generation. There is power, and almost a magical feel to these words calling the listener to pay attention. God commanded the children of Jacob to teach God’s ways to their children, so that the next generations would know God and not forget God’s ways.

The prophet Amos speaks against those who desire the day of the Lord, the day of judgment to come, in 5:18-24. They do not know what they are asking for. It is not what they think it is; judgment is for everyone, including those who think they are righteous. The prophet tells the people that God doesn’t desire festivals and offerings and songs of praise—things usually associated with worship and appeasing gods. But what God desires is right-living: justice that flows down like waters, righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. You cannot worship God and ignore the poor and oppressed around you.

The psalmist cries out to God for deliverance in Psalm 70. The psalmist prays for their enemies to be turned away in shame, for their persecutors to be turned back. Instead, the psalmist prays that those who seek God will rejoice and know God’s salvation. God is the psalmist’s help and salvation in their time of oppression and need.

Paul continues his letter to the church in Thessalonica in 1 Thessalonians 4:13-18. Paul, believing Christ would return soon, believed that those who died to themselves in Christ would rise, and be caught up with the angels mid-air (in Paul’s day, they believed heaven was literally above the earth). Nonetheless, Paul declared it is Christ who calls the dead to life, and that believers will be with God forever. Paul wrote to the church to encourage them and have them encourage one another, to not be discouraged and full of grief, but instead, to cling to hope.

Jesus told the parable of ten bridesmaids in Matthew 25:1-13 who were preparing to meet the bridegroom. Five had brought extra oil with them and five did not, but all fell asleep. The bridegroom was delayed, but when the time came for him to arrive, the five who did not bring extra oil asked to borrow oil from the ones who brought more. The ones who had more refused to share, and told the others to go buy oil for themselves. While the five were out buying oil, the bridegroom came, and the five who had brought extra accompanied the groom to the wedding party. When the other five returned, they knocked on the door, but were not allowed in because the groom did not know them. While much can be made about what it means to be wise and foolish, all fell asleep, and if Jesus teaches that the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor as ourselves, perhaps the bridesmaids with extra oil ought to have shared. There are plenty of stories (the Widow at Zarephath, for one, and the Maccabean Revolt story, for another) of oil that lasted much longer than expected, and these stories would have been known to those listening to Jesus tell this parable.

The Narrative Lectionary turns to the story of Jonah. God told Jonah to go to Nineveh, to cry out against the evil in the city, but Jonah instead fled the opposite direction toward Tarshish. When a storm came upon the sea, the others in his boat cast lots to determine who was responsible—and the lot fell to Jonah. He admitted he was running away from God, and told them to toss him overboard. They were reluctant to do so, but because the storm wouldn’t quit, they obliged, and prayed to God before tossing Jonah overboard. Jonah was swallowed up by a great fish, and spit out after three days, as Jonah prayed to God. Jonah then went to Nineveh, proclaiming that God would overthrow the city in 40 days. However, the king repented and called the people to repentance, and they turned back to God. God changed their mind about the destruction planned. This made Jonah angry. Jonah didn’t want to go to Nineveh and he knew God would not destroy the people if they changed their ways. God seems flabbergasted at Jonah’s selfishness, that Jonah was more concerned about his words being true than God’s love, mercy, and forgiveness for the people—and the animals, too.

In Luke 18:9-14, Jesus told a story of a Pharisee and a tax collector. In his story, a Pharisee and a tax collector both go to the temple to pray, and the Pharisee prays out loud, thanking God he is not like other sinners, including the tax collector, and goes on a long list about all the good things he does. Meanwhile, the tax collector simply strikes his own chest and calls for God to have mercy on him, a sinner. Jesus said that the tax collector went home justified instead of the Pharisee, because he showed humility.

Like Jonah, we can think we know what we are getting into, and then get upset when it doesn’t turn out the way we expected things to go. The people who were with Joshua declared their allegiance to God, but Joshua knew they didn’t fully understand what they were committing to. Amos rants at the people who want God’s judgment because they don’t realize what they are asking for is judgement on themselves. Instead, God desires for us to do judgment. When we read the parables of Jesus, its easy to draw the surface level conclusion: be prepared and ready for Christ’s return. But when we dig deeper, we remember that we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves, and that God is a God of abundance, not scarcity.

In the U.S. the Presidential election will have take place by the time these readings occur. What is it that we expect, and what will actually happen are probably far apart. We don’t know right now. Even on November 8th, for preachers preparing, we may still be unsure about the next ninety days. Instead, may we change our expectations of God to fix everything and remember we are called to let justice roll and righteousness flow. We are called to love our neighbor as ourselves. We are called to remember that what we expect is not what will happen, and instead, to encourage and build each other up.

Call to Worship

**Choose the way of God,**

 **Choose the way of justice and mercy.**

**Choose the life of God,**

 **Choose to love your neighbors as yourselves.**

**Choose the hope of God,**

 **For our hope is not found in the powers and princes of this world.**

**Choose the peace of God,**

 **For God’s peace is with those who seek and pursue justice.**

**Choose the way of God,**

 **Remembering that Christ is our way, our truth, and our life. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Ancient of Days, we make plans and predictions, but who are we? Mere mortals who have only a glimpse of what tomorrow brings. We don’t presume to understand what You know, O God, but we do know that You have been with us since the beginning, and You will see us through. You are the one who knows the hairs on our heads, who whispers our names, who knows the deep wounds we live with in our hearts. We come to You in our brokenness, in our aching, in our sighing, because You are the Great Physician. Heal us, O God. Heal our bodies and spirits. Heal our families, neighbors, communities. Heal our cities, our nation, our world. Heal us, O God, by restoring our hope, our faith in one another. Heal us by helping us to be whole again, to let go of the practices that cause harm, and cling to ways of justice, mercy, and peace. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Romans 8:38-39)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. There is nothing that will ever separate us from God’s love. You are God’s beloved child. You are forgiven, loved, and restored. Go and share the good news. Amen.

Prayer

Breathe in us, Holy Spirit. Breathe in us Your life. Breathe in us Your presence. Breathe in us Your hope, peace, joy—whatever it is we need. Breathe in us, breath of God, and call us into Your ways. In the chaos of the world, help us to remember to stop and breathe. To slow down and take notice of how You have been at work and are continuing to work in our world and in our lives. Breathe in us, Holy Spirit, and help us to move with each breath toward a more just, loving, and kind world. Amen.