Worship Resources for Sunday, January 13th—First Sunday after Epiphany (Baptism of the Lord)

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Luke 3:15-17, 21-22; Acts 8:14-17

As we read these passages the next few weeks at the end of the Exile, we recall the hope that the prophets proclaimed for a people who had experienced the destruction of their home and their temple. For a people who had felt like they were forgotten by God, the assurance of God’s love and care for them is paramount. Isaiah assures the people that God will deliver them, God will be with them, and God will provide for them. Though the way forward is unknown, and the return from exile won’t be exactly what they expect or hope it to be, the hope is not in human assumptions but in God’s presence with the people. So we, too, looking back on these passages find signs of hope for our future.

Psalm 29 recalls the act of God in creation: the voice of God that moves over the waters of creation continues to call over creation and bring forth new life. God who created the earth is continuing to create in our lives, and do new things in the universe. This is the God whom we follow, and worship.

Luke 3:15-17, 21-22 contains the proclamation of John the Baptist as well as the baptism of Jesus (we skip over the side note about Herod having John thrown into prison). As we commemorate Jesus’ baptism, we are reminded that God is doing a new thing. God is not only sending God’s Son to us, God is becoming flesh, human being, one of us. To become one of us, even Jesus goes through the waters of baptism, showing repentance—the turning back to God—and starting afresh with God. God is sweeping away the things of the past and creating all things new. Just as their ancestors had new life coming out of the desert through the Exodus, just as we hear the hope of new life in Isaiah for the people coming out of exile, so now God is doing something new, walking through the waters of baptism for repentance, becoming one of us, so that we might know God’s love fully revealed in Jesus the Christ. Baptism was a practice that began before John, but was reinterpreted by John—no longer just a ritual cleansing, this was a symbol of one’s change of life, of changing orientation to God from this world. With Jesus, this becomes a symbol of orienting one’s life to The Way of Christ, a symbol of renewed life and the promise of eternal life.

Acts 8:14-17 tells of the ministry of Peter and John, and the receiving of the Holy Spirit after the baptism of some in Samaria. This passage is difficult to understand, but reflects a later view of needing to receive the Holy Spirit to be fully “saved,” and that the Holy Spirit was not necessarily received at one’s baptism, but needed to come through the prayers of those who had received the Spirit. This distinction isn’t apparent in the Gospels or in the Epistles, but is a later view and shows the diversity of views within the early church about the role of baptism and the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

“When you pass through the waters, I shall be there.” The waters were a symbol of trial and tribulation, a boundary to be crossed, perhaps the Red Sea or the Jordan River in ancient times. For the people who had been exiled, the waters may have symbolized the entire time of exile—a turbulent time in which all they knew had been taken from them. For Christians, we seem the waters of baptism as a symbol of those trials and troubles, a symbol of death itself, and we come out on the other side, with the gift of new life, the hope of resurrection, everlasting life in Christ. We commemorate the baptism of Jesus today, reminded that we all have the gift of new life, of starting again with God, of renewing our commitments and reorienting our lives to God. The same God whose voice called out over the waters, who called down from above over the waters of Jesus’ baptism, is the same voice that calls us Beloved, and calls us into the promise of new life.

Call to Worship

God spoke through the prophet, “Do not fear, for I have redeemed you.”

 **God calls us by name, we belong to God.**

“When you pass through the waters”

 **God will be with us.**

“When you pass through the rivers”

 **God will be with us.**

“When you walk through the fire”

 **God will be with us.**

God is our Savior, we are precious in God’s sight.

 **Come let us worship our Savior, who leads us into life.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God who Delivers and Redeems, we have failed to live into the promise of new life. We have been afraid to enter troubled waters to help the poor and downtrodden. We have been afraid to walk with those burned by the system of sin and oppression. We have sought ease and comfort in exchange for ignoring the hungry and sick in our world. Forgive us when we have seen our faith in such narrowness, thinking of only our own salvation. Forgive us when we have not lived for others, when we have not been willing to risk ourselves for the sake of others. Call us into new life, a life that is lived in the promise of Your love for the whole world. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

In the darkness, light shines. In the midst of troubled waters, a hand reaches out. We are not alone on this journey of faith. When we seek God, we shall find God. God forgives, renews, and restores—let us go forth and do the work of God. Amen.

Prayer

Architect of the Universe, Your voice called out over the deep and darkness and brought forth light. Your voice called out over the waters and brought forth life. Your voice called out over this earth and brought forth our very beings. Your voice continues to call out in our Universe and bring new hope and new life. Help us to hear Your voice above the hum of the highway and the buzz of the business talk. Help us to hear Your voice in the cries of children, in the soft tones of the sick, in the pleas of the poor. May we hear, listen, and respond to Your voice in our lives and in our world. In Your name we pray. Amen.