Worship Resources for January 13, 2018—Baptism of the Lord Sunday

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

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus’ Baptism, Matthew 3:1-17 (Psalm 2:7-8)

We begin with the prophet Isaiah speaking words of comfort to the people coming out of exile. God is their redeemer, and God will lead them through the water and fire; God will not allow them to be harmed by danger. God would give up anything, anyone, for them, because they are precious to God. They have suffered so much, and God’s desire for them is healing and restoration. God will gather up the remnant, for God made them, and God loves them.

The psalmist echoes back to the first verses of creation in Psalm 29, calling upon the heavenly beings to praise God. The voice of God is over the waters, just as God’s voice called forth light over the darkness that covered the face of the waters in Genesis. God’s voice is powerful, calling forth creation. God will destroy the strongholds of the enemies and put nations to fear, shaking the wilderness. God is on the throne of creation—even destructive floodwaters are under God’s feet. The psalmist concludes with a blessing, asking God to bless the people with strength and peace.

In the book of Acts, Peter and John go to some followers of Jesus in Samaria, who have accepted Jesus and have been baptized in his name. However, these Samaritans have not received the Holy Spirit, so Paul and John lay hands on them to receive the Spirit.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ baptism in 3:15-17, 21-22 begins with the people who have gathered with John, because they believe he might be the Messiah. However, John insists he is not. The one who is coming after him is more powerful. John is baptizing with water, but the Messiah will baptize with the Holy Spirit and fire—a purifying, refiner’s fire. The winnowing fork will separate the wheat from the chaff, which grow up together in the same stalk. After John’s sermon to them, Jesus is baptized, and the Holy Spirit descends like a dove, and the voice of God declares that this is God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

The Narrative Lectionary also focuses on Jesus’ baptism, but from Matthew’s account. John the Baptizer warns those who have gathered to him, including many of the religious leaders, that they can’t count on their heritage and ancestry to save them. Their outward identity is not enough; they must bear good fruit, or their tree will be cut down. As with Luke’s account, John the Baptist invokes the image of the winnowing fork, separating the wheat from the chaff that grow in the same stalk together. The chaff will be burned with unquenchable fire. But when Jesus approaches John to be baptized, John hesitates. “I need to be baptized by you, and do you come to me?” But Jesus declares it must be so, and John baptizes him. When he rises from the water, the Spirit descends like a dove, declaring that Jesus is God’s Son, the Beloved, with whom God is well pleased.

The psalmist declares in Psalm 2:7-8, a psalm of praise for royalty, that God has adopted a new son. This was a symbolic way of stating that the king of the people was under God, adopted by God.

Baptism and beginnings: it’s both a wonderful and terrifying image. John the Baptizer was not a gentle man. He warned those gathering near him to bear fruit, to show inward transformation, before coming forward to be baptized. The purification by God is painful, because it strips away the parts of us that do not bear fruit for God. But, as Jesus is declared God’s Beloved, so we also are God’s Beloved children, when we come forward to become the people God has intended us to be: to turn back to God, to live into the Holy Spirit, to become wheat that is free from chaff, fruit worth of repentance.

Call to Worship (from Isaiah 43:1-4)

Now thus says the Lord, the One who created you:

 **Do not be afraid!**

God has called you by name, and you belong to God;

 **When we pass through danger, God is with us.**

The waters will not overwhelm us, the fire will not consume us;

 **For God is the Creator, the Holy One.**

We are precious in God’s sight;

 **God loves each of us dearly.**

 **Come, worship God, who leads us into life.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that at times we do not bear fruit worthy of repentance. At times we do not want to change, to transform into who You intended us to be. At times we want to stay stubbornly the same but desire everyone around us to change. Forgive us for our unwillingness to grow. Forgive us for our resistance to being pruned. Forgive us for not trusting You, and the light You are growing us in. Call us into Your light. Call us into Your restoration. Help us to trust in You, and to become who You intended us to be, as people faithful to justice, mercy, and love. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

The Gardener is already at work, deep in the earth where the bulbs are waiting. God is at work in us, deep inside us, where the spirit of life longs to bloom. Let go of your resistance, and find God lovingly restoring you, cultivating a healthy garden around you. Trust in the Gardener, who is leading us into life. You are forgiven. You are loved. You are restored. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, Your presence is always with us, but at times we do not perceive it. Sometimes the waters are overwhelming, even when it is good for us to pass through. Sometimes the fire burns too hot, and fear envelopes us. Remind us of Your loving presence. Holy One, be gentle with us. Help us to grow in our trust of You. Help us to let go of our fears that hold us back: loving others, accepting others, and finding that You are at work beyond what we can see, beyond what we know. Help us to trust that questions can remain unanswered. Help us to accept that all things are changing, but You are at work around us, working for good. Help us to understand that we will not know everything now, but that You are always with us, and that knowledge is so wonderful for us. Help us to trust in You. Amen.