Worship Resources for January 19th, 2019—Second Sunday after the Epiphany, Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 49:1-7; Psalm 40:1-11; 1 Corinthians 1:1-9; John 1:29-42

Narrative Lectionary: Parables in Mark, Mark 4:1-34 (Psalm 126)

The second of the servant songs of Isaiah, the prophet speaks as Israel, collectively as one in 49:1-7. The prophet speaks poetically of how God has known Israel long before Israel knew themselves as the people of God. Through Israel, God is glorified. God has chosen Israel so that other nations will know God. Though it seems impossible, and the people have been in exile, they will return home, and be raised up once again.

Psalm 40 is a song of praise, for God has heard the cry of the singer, and delivered them from the pit of death. The psalmist sings praise for God who has delivered them, warning others against turning to false gods. The psalmist has not hidden their faith, but has declared it boldly. God does not require offerings, but for the faithful to keep the law within their hearts, and to sing of God’s faithfulness and steadfast love.

The first letter to the church in Corinth from Paul (though many scholars believe there may have been a letter before this that was lost) begins with Paul’s introduction and greeting: “Grace and peace to you from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ” (vs. 3). Paul gives thanks for the church in Corinth, and remarks that through God’s grace they are not lacking in any spiritual gift—for spiritual gifts will take up a large portion of this letter’s address. Paul declares that Christ will strengthen them, and that God is faithful. They have been called into the fellowship of God’s son, Jesus Christ our Lord.

When John the Baptist sees Jesus coming toward him in John 1:29-42, he declared, “Here is the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!” (vs. 29). John the Baptist told the story of Jesus’ baptism to his disciples, and testified that Jesus was the Son of God. The next day, when Jesus walked by, John again declared that Jesus was the lamb of God. Two of John’s own disciples began to follow Jesus: one of them was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, who then went and told Simon that they had found the Messiah.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the parables Jesus teaches in Mark 4:1-34. Large crowds gathered around Jesus as he taught by the sea, and he taught using parables. The first was the Parable of the Sower, in which seed fell on different kinds of soil—but the seed that rooted in good soil brought forth a large yield of grain. Jesus explained to his disciples later, alone, about the different types of soil. He then taught his disciples with more parables: about a lamp not being hidden under a bushel basket or under the bed, but on a lampstand; then another parable about the kingdom of God being like seed scattered on the ground, and when the grain is ripe, it is harvested. Lastly, he tells a parable of the kingdom of God being like a mustard seed, growing into a mighty shrub in which the birds of the air make their homes. The writer of Mark’s gospel tells us that Jesus used many parables, but only explained them to his disciples in private.

Psalm 126 is a song of praise for deliverance. When the people of Israel are restored to their homes, it is like the rivers in spring, restored to their fullness. Those who left weeping with only seeds will return home, carrying the full heads of grain with them, and be full of joy.

The theme of deliverance from evil, of restoration, fits well with Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday. “Let us realize the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Dr. King was quoting Unitarian minister Theodore Parker, who lived one hundred years before Dr. King. As we read Psalm 40 or Psalm 126, or Isaiah, we recognize that God is with the people who have suffered. God is with the oppressed. God is with those who have faced injustice and marginalization. God seeks restoration, not retribution. The work of restorative justice, however, is painful. As Mary sang in the Advent season reading, “He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty” (Luke 1:52-53). If you are powerful, if you are rich, this restorative work is painful. We have a long way to go in the United States to offer reparations for slavery, to restore what was taken from Native Americans, to repair the work of colonization and exploitation. But it is a work we must engage as faithful Christians. For God calls us into this work.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 40:1-3)

I put all my hope in the Lord,

**God leans near to me, listens to my cry for help.**

God lifts me from the pit of fear and death,

**God sets me on solid ground and steadies me.**

The Lord puts a new song in our mouths,

**A song of praise for our God.**

When people hear of this, they will be amazed,

**And they will trust in our God.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Hope, at times all we feel is hopelessness. We have waited so long for justice. We have worked so hard and it seems for nothing. The world seems to get worse, as more people struggle to make ends meet, as more people become homeless, as violence rages around us. Burn the flame in us, O God, of hope. Be the light that cannot be hidden. Remind us that we are not alone, and others can help our light to shine. Call upon us to lean on one another during trying times. May we remember each other in prayer, and may we seek prayer from others. May we encourage and lift up one another, and call upon others for help. May we be renewed in spirit, O God, and look to Jesus Christ, the perfecter of our faith, who lived as one of us, died as one of us, but lives again so that all may have eternal love and life. It is in Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God restores us and renews us. Even when we feel nothing but despair and dread, the seed of hope is planted in us, and we will come home, as the psalmist says, with shouts of joy and carrying our sheaves. God is at work in you, to refresh and renew you, to lift you up when you have fallen, and to carry you when needed. Trust in God. Trust in God’s love found in one another. Receive the gifts of encouragement and hope from each other, and know that you are stronger together. You are loved, and you are needed. Go and share the good news. Amen.

Prayer

God of all seasons: it is midwinter in the north of our world, midsummer in the south. Cold and ice grip our lands in the north; fires rage out of control in the south. Fear has frozen us, and anger at injustice rages in us. Yet spring is now. God, You have planted seeds in us, seeds of joy and love and hope. Seeds of encouragement and courage. These seeds are already taking root, whether we are frozen in fear, or burning with rage. Whether it be war or rumors of war, or poverty and homelessness and despair that have taken hold of us, Your seeds are in us. Nourish those seeds, O God, through the prayers of others. Cultivate in us hope and joy. Water us with Your Spirit. God of all seasons, You are the Master Gardener, You are the one who will restore what is frozen or burned away. You are already at work in us, even though we cannot see it—we know it. Help us to hold on to that truth, and to live into hope. Amen.

Litany for Martin Luther King, Jr. Sunday

God of the prophets, God of justice, we call upon You today in our distress:

**We weep for the violence in our world.**

We cry out for the children locked in cages;

**We lament that our neighbors sleep outside on the street.**

We raise our voices against the violence of antisemitism and Islamophobia;

**We are fed up, O God, with the injustice and hatred spewed in Your name.**

We demand our elected officials take seriously the mass incarceration of Black people and police violence;

**We call out the systems and structures that have oppressed people of color for far too long.**

We confess where we have fallen short, where we have been ignorant;

**We confess that at times we may have hindered rather than helped.**

We confess that our silence has caused more harm;

**We seek forgiveness for the ways we have inhibited the work of justice.**

We lift up to You, O God, our hearts, our voices, our own bodies.

**We pledge ourselves to live out Your ways of reparation and healing.**

We commit ourselves to the pursuit of justice,

**For only through justice may we know peace.**

On this Sunday, we remember and honor Rev. Dr. Martin Luther, King, Jr. and his legacy.

**We remember and honor all those in the long struggle for justice.**

We recommit ourselves to Your ways, as spoken by the prophet Micah:

**We pledge to do justice, act in loving-kindness, and walk humbly with our God.**

We go forth into the world as ambassadors of justice and peace;

**We live, knowing our very lives are witnesses of Your restoration.**

We ask for Your guidance, O God, for our life’s journey; for Your wisdom in life’s struggles,

**And for Your peace in our hearts and in our world. Amen.**