Worship Resources for January 27th—Third Sunday after Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Nehemiah 8:1-10; Psalm 19; Luke 4:14-21; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

As we read from the prophets in our Hebrew Scriptures reading, today we read of the prophet Ezra, as recorded in Nehemiah, reading from the scroll of the law to the people. The passage indicates that others also helped Ezra relay the words to the people, offering interpretation so they would understand, interpreting from Hebrew to the common Aramaic, but they also “gave the sense, so that the people understood the reading” (vs 8). The tradition of interpreting scripture, of trying to make meaning for a group of people—of preaching—has roots in our scriptures! For the people of Nehemiah and Ezra’s time, who were returning to Jerusalem after a lengthy exile, they needed to hear the old story in a new way. Perhaps readings of the law, reminiscent of the people coming out of the exodus, resonated with a people coming out of exile. Perhaps they needed to be reminded of both the covenant of God that had been broken as well as the hope of God that is renewed. So do we—thousands of years later—also need to hear the words of scripture afresh and new for our day.

Psalm 19 praises God the Creator and also indicates that the voice of God is heard not just in the words of Scripture, but also the voice of God is carried through creation. The law of God (the Torah) is also witnessed in creation. The creator of heavens and earth is also the creator of the law, and we can hear God’s words and see God’s works in both creation and the written scripture.

Luke 4:14-21 contains the first teaching of Jesus in the synagogue. In the course of events of Jesus’ life, in the church year we skip the temptation of Jesus for now and read it instead on the first Sunday of Lent. So we must remember that Jesus has just returned from the wilderness full of the Spirit, comes to his hometown synagogue, and reads from the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming that today the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. We will get more of their reaction and Jesus’ teachings next week (it is a shame, sometimes, how the lectionary splits up passages like this—so as an aside, if you want to preach the full text of John 4:14-37 this week, preach from I Corinthians 13 next week). But what we know in this first passage is this: Jesus begins speaking in Galilee and in neighboring synagogues and people have begun to talk about him and praise him. At least in his hometown and surrounding region he is becoming well-known and so far, the people are enjoying his message. Preaching and interpretation are part of a tradition in our worship that stretches back into our Hebrew Scriptures, and Jesus also participates in this tradition.

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a is Paul’s discourse on spiritual gifts. Writing to a congregation that is divided, Paul preaches unity by diversity. Paul extols the various gifts of the spirit at the end of this section, including preaching, but stresses that all gifts are needed as part of the body of Christ.

The lectionary readings this week have a pattern of linking the art of reading scripture, interpretation and preaching, but we are wise to remember that these are not the only spiritual gifts. Paul reminds us that we need teachers, leaders, interpreters, those who help others in addition to preaching—but there are greater gifts, gifts of faith, hope, compassion, care—and love. These are the gifts that are needed in our world today. All other gifts—preaching, teaching, leading, etc.—should work to the benefit of God’s gift of love.

Call to Worship

In the roar of the waterfall, in the rush of waves on the shore

 **We hear the call of God.**

In the rustle of wind in the leaves, in the trickle of a slow stream

 **We listen for the whisper of God.**

In the heights of snow-capped mountains, the lushness of the forest,

 **We see the work of God the Creator.**

God’s covenant is written in the landscape, heard in the sounds of creation

 **God’s covenant is written in our hearts**

Come, let us worship our Creator, the Author of Faith

 **Come, let us seek the wisdom of our God.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Author of Life, we confess that we have tried to write our lives our own way. We dream of earthly success and comforts and have forgotten those who struggle and are suffering. We have forgotten to seek the lost and least, and we put ourselves first as if we were the main characters. Forgive us for not seeking Your intention in our lives, to love You by loving our neighbors as ourselves. Remind us to seek a greater story than ourselves. In the name of Christ, who changes everything always, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

For there is nothing we can do, no place where we can go, where we will be separated from our God who loves us. Know that you are forgiven and loved, and that the promise of new life begins now. Go and live this Good News. Amen.

Prayer

God of our ancestors, God of our children, God of past and present, we know You continue to stir in us the call to compassion, justice, mercy and hope. Help us to live into Your story, following Your commandments and honoring the teachings of the prophets, past and present, to lift up the poor and the oppressed, to love our neighbors as ourselves. Help us to preach it, to proclaim it, but most of all, to live out Your story in our daily lives, that we might be living witnesses of Your Good News. In the name of Jesus, who came before us, walked with us, and is coming again into this world in a new way, we pray. Amen.