Worship Resources for January 28th, 2018—Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Narrative Lectionary: Nicodemus, John 3:1-21 (Psalm 139:13-18)

As part of Moses’ farewell speech, Moses declares that God will raise up another prophet like him in Deuteronomy 18:15-20. This prophet will come from among the people, and will speak on behalf of God. Those who do not listen to the words of God will be held accountable by God, and those who speak on behalf of other gods, or say things that God did not say, will meet their end.

Psalm 111 calls the congregation to praise God and give thanks for God’s mighty works. God is the one who provides for the people, who establishes justice, and whose covenant will last forever. This call to worship reminds the listener that the beginning of wisdom is to be in awe of God.

Paul speaks of some of the division between Gentile and Jewish believers in the church in Corinth. While Paul believes that idols do not exist, Paul understands that those converting from the Greek pantheon struggle with this. In the Roman world, animals were sacrificed at the local temple to the gods, and then the meat was distributed for consumption. Paul has no problem eating this meat because those gods do not exist, but for those who recently converted, it was an abomination. So Paul advises that if this is a stumbling block, then those who have no problem eating meat ought to refrain from eating meat. In many ways, we see this played out in churches today, for those that choose to have no alcohol, though there is no prohibition within the faith on drinking alcohol, they do not wish to be a stumbling block for others. Paul is asking the elders to make accommodations for the newer members, so that the newer members do not stumble.

Jesus’ first time teaching in the synagogue happens in Capernaum in Mark 1:21-28. The people are astonished at Jesus’ teaching, because he claimed his authority, and when Jesus is confronted with an unclean spirit, he rebukes it. The people claim it is a new teaching, because the teaching has authority, and at once, the word began to spread to the surrounding villages.

The Narrative Lectionary continues in John’s Gospel account with Nicodemus’ visit to Jesus in 3:1-21. A few things to note: Nicodemus is a Pharisee. Pharisees are often seen as the enemies in Christian history, but when we read closer, we find that Jesus has much in common with the Pharisees, especially in the belief of the resurrection. Luke’s account reminds us in 13:31-35 that not all of the Pharisees were out to get Jesus—some tried to warn him about Herod before he went to Jerusalem. Here, in John’s account, Nicodemus does come to Jesus at night, presumably so no one else will know, but he calls Jesus “Rabbi” and says “we know you are a teacher who has come from God” (vs. 2). The “we” implies that there may be others who saw Jesus differently. But Nicodemus doesn’t understand Jesus, when he speaks of being born from above, and takes it literally. Jesus continues his discourse for the chapter speaking about being born from above, and in a sense, taking the view from above. For God so loved the world—not just part of the world, not just a segment. For God sent the son into the world not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved. The view that Jesus takes is one that encompasses the world, and all of life, and all of light, and this is a view that seems incomprehensible at first to Nicodemus, and even to us.

Where does authority come from? Jesus comes with a new teaching, a teaching with authority. He doesn’t have the years of study as a rabbi. He doesn’t have the experience. But he speaks as one with authority. But how quickly we are to dismiss God-given authority! We assume lack of experience, which in reality is lack of someone with our experience. If they don’t speak, look, and act like us, they must not have experience. Jesus came from the people, but didn’t speak exactly like the teachers and prophets they were used to. Nicodemus recognized Jesus as a teacher, but still was confounded by what he was saying. Being open to the Spirit requires us to experience God-given authority from people we are not used to, especially when we are used to being in power, determining who speaks on behalf of God. But Moses reminds the people that a new prophet will rise from among them, with authority given by God.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 111)

I will give thanks to God with my whole heart,

**In the company of the congregation we give thanks and praise.**

Great are the works of God,

**And God’s works are full of honor and majesty.**

God’s righteousness endures forever,

**And God is gracious and merciful.**

The works of God’s hands are faithful and just,

**Holy and awesome is God’s name.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God Who Teaches, we confess that we have not learned our lessons. We have failed to follow Your commandments. We have failed to listen well to our teachers. We have given weight to teachings that give us an easy way out, that focus on only our well-being, and have failed to listen to the teachings of Christ, that call us to become last of all and servant of all. Forgive us for our failures. Forgive us for not seeking You and Your authority. Forgive us for ignoring Your wisdom. Call us into the paths of righteousness. Call us into the ways of justice. Call us away from the foolishness of the world, to follow Jesus, our Rabbi, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Jesus declares that God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. God does not desire retribution, but restoration. Live into God’s restorative ways by seeking forgiveness, correcting your ways, and following the way that Christ set before us, to love our neighbor as ourselves. Practice these teachings, practices these ways, and live into the new life of Christ. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Prophets, preach through us today. Move us to protest injustice and proclaim Your justice. Call us to speak against hate and to speak with love. Turn us away from our own sorrows to the suffering of the world. Lift us up when our hearts are discouraged, and hold us steadfast in Your ways of love, justice, mercy, and peace. In Your name we pray. Amen.