Worship Resources for January 8th, 2016—First Sunday after Epiphany, Baptism of the Lord Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary for Epiphany: Isaiah 60:1-6; Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14; Ephesians 3:1-12; Matthew 2:1-12

Revised Common Lectionary for Baptism of the Lord Sunday: Isaiah 42:1-9; Psalm 29; Acts 10:34-43; Matthew 3:13-17

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus’ Baptism, Luke 3:1-22 (Psalm 51:6-17 or 51:13)

The reflections on Epiphany are the same as in last week’s blog post:

The readings for Epiphany begin with Isaiah’s call that the light has come in Isaiah 60:1-6. The light has come to the people who were in exile as they return home, but Isaiah shifts the image—the light has come to the people, but now they *are* the light, and other nations are *drawn* to their light because they see what God has done for the people. Other nations will bring their wealth, including frankincense and gold upon the young camels of Midian.

Psalm 72:1-7, 10-14 speaks of a king that rules justly, because they rule with God’s justice. The psalmist asks for God to bless the king with the ability to judge rightly, especially for the poor. The psalmist prays that the king’s reign will be in peace, that other nations will serve him, because this king rules justly and defends the cause of the poor.

Paul declares in Ephesians 3:1-12 that the great mystery of God’s inclusive love for all people has finally been revealed in Christ, that the Gentiles are also heirs to the promise of God. This “wisdom of God in its rich variety” has been revealed through the church, and the eternal purpose is for the world to know God’s love.

The Magi visit Jesus in Matthew 2:1-12. These “wise ones,” scholars or astrologers are outsiders, Gentiles, who know something that King Herod and his own scribes don’t—that a new king has been born. They have observed the star rising for a new king, and have come to pay him homage. Herod’s own scribes have to scramble to find passages in the Hebrew Scriptures that point to a Messiah, and the city of David’s own birth. And unlike our Nativity crèches, the Wise Ones find Mary and the child in a home, pay him homage and give him their gifts there. And then, warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they go home by another way.

We begin the readings for Baptism of the Lord Sunday with one of the “Servant Songs” passages from Isaiah. The servant, as described by Isaiah, was the people of Israel personified. The people themselves would now be the light unto nations, the faithful servant chosen by God, the one who will bring forth God’s justice. Later readers interpreted these passages as pointing to a new king or Messiah; Christian readers saw attributes of Jesus in these passages. But Isaiah, in vs. 5, states that God is speaking to the people, that God is taking them by the hand, that they are the ones who will bring good news, release to the prisoners, and light to the nations.

Psalm 29 is a song of praise to God who is the God of creation and the God of all nations. God’s voice speaks through the acts of creation, speaking to the people through the thunder, wind, and fire, but God is enthroned over all, and the people are called to be in awe and wonder of their majestic God. The psalmist closes with a blessing, asking God to give strength and peace to the people.

Peter has beheld a vision n Acts 10 and has met Cornelius, a Centurion, and, more importantly for Peter, a Gentile. After beholding this vision of unclean meat and being told to eat, because what God has declared clean, one must not profane. He is called to meet Cornelius, and he understands that God is breaking open age-old assumptions and understandings. In verses 34-43, Peter declares his understanding boldly, that God shows no partiality. Peter concludes his speech about Jesus, who was crucified and raised on the third day, that the prophets testify to who Jesus is, and that all receive forgiveness through his name.

Matthew’s account of John’s baptism of Jesus is similar to Mark and Luke’s. John is astounded that Jesus wants to be baptized by him, but Jesus announces that this is to fulfill all righteousness. John consents to baptize Jesus, and the heavens are opened and the Spirit of God descends like a dove alighting on him. A voice declares, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased.”

The Narrative Lectionary also focuses on the Baptism of Jesus, from Luke’s perspective, and includes John’s discourse beforehand and the link of John to the call of the prophet Isaiah, “the voice of one crying out in the wilderness.” John, as similar to Matthew’s account, warns those who have gathered to bear fruit worthy of repentance (in Matthew’s account, John’s warning is specific to the Pharisees and Sadducees that have gathered at the river). In Luke’s account, John gives specific instructions about sharing out of what the people have with those in need, and how tax collectors and soldiers ought to behave as well. Luke also tells at this point that John will be thrown into prison because of his proclamations about Herod’s goings-on with Herod’s brother’s wife. Then Jesus comes to John, and John baptizes him.

Psalm 51:6-17 is the psalmist’s plea for forgiveness and mercy, hoping to be made clean before God. In verse 13, the psalmist specifically declares that if he is restored to God, he will teach all others God’s ways, and that sinners will turn back to God. God doesn’t delight in sacrifices, the psalmist tells, but rather those who turn to God with an open heart.

The Light of the World has come, and the people are now the Light-bearers. God’s light is made known through revelation of Christ to the world, and through the heavens opening and the Spirit descending. But the Light is also made known through the consent of John the Baptist in fulfilling Jesus’ request for baptism. The Light is made known through Peter’s vision and bold declaration that God shows know partiality. The Light is made known through our own revealing of Christ, by living out God’s covenant in our own lives, by the public symbol of our baptism, and by our own open hearts to God.

Call to Worship

The Light of the World has come!

 **The Light of the World is here!**

The Light of the World is coming again!

 **The Light of the World is in us!**

Arise, shine, for our light has come!

 **Shine bright, for the Light of the World is Jesus!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess before You that we have not shone our light. We have been burned out, drained dry, run ragged. We are a tired people, busy with many things, our mind wandering on countless to-do lists and problems and worries. Relieve us of our burdens, O God, for You called us to place our burdens on You. Rekindle the fire in our hearts, O God, so that we might burn bright for You. Restore in us Your Spirit so that we will be renewed, to continue to share the awe and wonder of the season, and to let Your light shine in us for all the world to see. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Jesus has been on our path, breathed our air, carried our struggles. Life is not easy or fair, but it is worth it with a companion on this journey of faith. Give your burdens over to Christ, and know that you are not alone. You are restored, rejuvenated, and blessed by the God that loves you madly. Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, the new year has begun, the resolutions made, the Christmas decorations are coming down. Life is returning to the ordinary time that we travel through most of the year. This year, however, rekindle the light of Advent. Help us to keep watching and waiting for signs of Your return. Help us to keep hope alive when times are difficult. Even though daylight is steadily growing, it still seems dark to us. Help us to shine our light, boldly and bright, without fear or shame. You are the Christ, the Living God who dwells in us, and in Your name, may we change the world. Amen.