Worship Resources for October 21—Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Job 38:1-7, 34-31 or Isaiah 53:4-12; Psalm 91:9-16 or Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c; Mark 10:35-45; Hebrews 5:1-10

In our saga of Job, God finally has responded to Job. God allowed Job to get it all out, to lay out his case before God, to scream and shake his fist and curse the world. God waited until it was all out, then God responded, “Who are you, and where were you?” At times, we cannot see beyond our own issues, our own problems, our own concerns, our own valley of the shadow. The fog of despair becomes so thick around us. We want to know why these things are happening and what we have done to deserve them. God’s response to Job reminds us that there are things beyond our understanding, a whole universe at work around us, and yes, God is mindful of us and of all things. They may not be words of comfort, but they are words reminding us that there is a greater wisdom to be had, and not the wisdom of the world, in which the good are praised and the bad are punished and that you must have done something wrong if bad things happen. Instead, the wisdom that comes from God reminds us that all the universe is at work, and we are but a small, temporary part—but God is mindful of us. God does not forget us, but we forget about all that God is doing.

Isaiah 53:4-12 is part of the Suffering Servant songs found in Second Isaiah, preparing for the return from exile. The Jews in exile understood these passages as being about Israel, the servant(s) of God who had suffered, but soon would be able to return home. Later Christians, in the generation after Jesus’ death and resurrection, found echoes of Jesus’ story in the songs of the Suffering Servant. We need to remember, in light of Job, that not all the people had gone astray, had done something that deserved this kind of punishment—indeed, from the wisdom of God we learn through the prophets that God does not desire punishment and retribution, but rather restorative justice. God desires reconciliation, healing, restoration. The people of Israel have been through their own death and resurrection, coming out of exile. It is easy to see how this story resonates in the life of Jesus, but we must not confuse prophecy with prediction. Isaiah was not necessarily predicting Jesus, but rather, as Isaiah saw what was happening to the people of God, how they had suffered and had come to life again, so the early Christians saw the story of Jesus as a fulfillment of this greater story of God—that life comes out of death.

Psalm 91:9-16 reminds us that through God’s faithfulness we will prevail. It is not a promise of help right when we need it, but a hope that when we remain faithful, God also will remain faithful, and that even our fears cannot overcome us.

Psalm 104:1-9, 24, 35c are selections from Psalm 104 celebrating God who created all things, all creatures, and that not only heaven but also earth is God’s home. God is present everywhere, not only in a temple of stone that can fall or a building of wood that can be destroyed, but God is present everywhere God has created. In God’s wisdom, we can find God everywhere and anywhere.

Mark 10:35-45 continues our passages about the disciples just not getting it. This time, it is James and John that want to be next to Jesus. They don’t desire to be like Christ, but next to Christ. After Jesus tells them that they don’t know what they are asking, and that it isn’t theirs to ask for, the other disciples become angry with James and John. Dissension is sown. Infighting occurs. Jesus reminds them that this is not the way they are to be, but rather they are to be last of all and servant of all. In our “me first” world it is easy to fight our way to the top, to try to survive, to succeed, but God calls us to a different way. Jesus calls us to a life of serving, a life of meeting the needs of others before our own wants. It is not an easy life, but it is a life that is Christ-like, as Christ gave himself for us, so we ought to give ourselves for others and serve others.

Hebrews 5:1-10 is a discourse continuing the discussion of Jesus serving as the high priest. No longer is there anyone on earth who intercedes for us but it is Jesus who does so. The writer of Hebrews uses the traditions and rituals of priesthood that would have been understood by the Jewish listeners of his day to explain Jesus’ role with God. This may sound foreign to us, and it should, because many of us in the mainline traditions have done away with this understanding of the role of priests and ministers. Instead, we understand the role of the clergy as to be those who help equip all people for ministry, for there is nothing separating us from God. And there is no one interceding for us except Jesus—and it’s not because we need someone to protect us from God’s wrath, as has been interpreted in the past—but because God desired to make God’s self like us in the life and humanity of Christ. Rather than bringing us up to God, God brought God’s self down to us through Jesus the Christ.

We still try to do things our own way, understand God through our own lens—the wisdom of the world. We don’t understand when things don’t work according to our wisdom—if I worked hard, it should work out for me. If I do my part, then God should reward me. It doesn’t work that way. Instead, when we turn to God’s wisdom, we understand that there is a great mystery of God’s work in the universe that is underfoot. And rather than trying to attain God’s wisdom, God has come to us in Christ Jesus so that we might know God’s ways through the life and witness of a human being from God. Through Jesus, we know how to love and serve and live with others and for others. Through this kind of life, we may actually attain the wisdom of God instead of continuing the wisdom of the world.

Call to Worship (adapted from Job 28)

Where can wisdom be found? Where is the place of understanding?

 God knows the way to it, and God will lead us there.

Where does wisdom come from? Where is the place of understanding?

 Leaving the ways of evil, and walking in the ways of God.

The wisdom of the world tells me to seek my own path and success.

 The wisdom of Christ tells me to serve and love others.

Leave the wisdom of the world behind, and let us follow God!

 Let us walk in the ways of God’s wisdom: love, justice, and peace!

 Let us worship our God!

Prayer of Confession/Prayer of Brokenness

Only Wise God, we confess that we have mistaken the foolishness of the world for wisdom. We have sought our own gain and have left others behind. We have ignored the homeless on the street to get to work on time. We have withheld funds from the poor in order to save for our own rainy day. Forgive us for our foolishness. Call us into Your wisdom, modeled by Christ: to be last of all and servant of all, to welcome into our lives those whom we encounter, to seek the well-being of the last and the least. May we hear Your voice of wisdom, which calls out in our daily lives. In the name of our Christ and the Spirit of Wisdom, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon/Blessing

The Spirit of Wisdom from God reminds us that we can always turn back, we can always start again, we are always given the gift of new life. You are forgiven, loved, renewed and restored. Go and live for God and for others, following the Way of Christ. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, we come to You in the busy-ness of this fall season, as the time of the holidays draw near. We know that it is easy to be drawn into the path of consumerism, the buzz of busy-ness, and the noise of the world. As the election season also draws near, loving God, hold us close to You. May we experience Your Wisdom in our lives that helps us to slow down and find quiet and rest in You. May we experience the risen Christ in our lives, that we may know all things are possible in You and that there is hope for a new day, a new start. In the name of Jesus, our loving Savior and Spirit of Wisdom, we pray. Amen.