Worship Resources for October 5th, 2014—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost, World Communion Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 20:1-4, 7-9, 12-20 or Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 19 or Psalm 80:7-15; Philippians 3:4b-14; Matthew 21:33-46

Narrative Lectionary: Covenant and Commandments, Exodus 19:3-7, 20:1-17 (Matthew 5:17)

Our first thread of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Lectionary follows our ancestors, from Abraham and Sarah to the people entering their new home. Today, we read from the Decalogue, the Ten Commandments. For a family that has grown into a nation, moving from slavery into freedom, now they needed to define who they were and what the rules of their community would be. This family, this nation would call themselves God’s people. The commandments, and the ordinances and statutes that follow, help this people create identity, understand their relationship to God, and understand how they are different from the peoples around them. Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachel and Leah and their children—they had a covenant with God, an understanding of what God was doing for their family. Now that the people have grown into a nation, in their newly found freedom and struggle of being in the wilderness, God’s covenant is now understood in the Law.

Our second thread of the Hebrew Scriptures in the Lectionary follows the prophets. This passage of Isaiah uses the image of a vineyard as the people of Israel. It is a parable. God has planted a vineyard—dug its rows, built a watchtower so that others would not disturb it, set its boundaries and nurtured it and watered it—but it has grown wild. It has not heeded the borders set up, it has not followed the layout and has turned away from God’s intention. Therefore, the boundaries will be removed and it will be destroyed, cut down, and demolished. The vineyard is a metaphor for what the people have done—they have ignored the commandments of God, and instead of justice, have given in to greed and jealousy. They have ignored God’s ways and chosen their own, and therefore, they will face the consequences of their own actions.

Psalm 19 sings that the heavens are telling the glory of God. A celebration of God’s work in creation, the psalmist also sings of God’s work through the commandments and the law, that they are to be desired above all worldly creations. God has given the commandments, and therefore they should be prized above everything else. The psalmist seeks to follow God’s ways, knowing that God delights in those who follow.

Psalm 80:7-15 counters the words of the prophet Isaiah, as if the people are crying out for God to save the vineyard. They know they have gone astray, but the people plea for God to remember the vineyard and to remember that it was God who planted it. The psalmist sings for God to restore the vineyard instead of letting it be destroyed; to save the people instead of letting them fall into the hands of their enemies, despite the fact that they have turned away from God.

Philippians 3:4b-14 is Paul’s declaration from prison that whatever gains he has from his privilege as one born of the law, he will give it up for Christ. He will share in the sufferings of Christ, hoping that he might become like Christ in his suffering. Paul has left what he has known behind—a known past for an unknown future—with the hope of being like Christ in death and obtaining the resurrection of the dead. Paul is willing to give up his privilege of his past in order to live and die as Christ lived and died.

Jesus’ parable in Matthew 21:33-46 also uses a vineyard, echoing back to Isaiah, but this time it is about the tenants of the vineyard, who do not respect the landowner and his servants, and then end up killing the landowner’s son. It is interesting to note that the landowner sends his son, not with the expectation that his son will die, but with the hope that the tenants will listen to his son. This parable puts the formulaic “God sent Jesus to die for our sins” statement into question. Rather, God sent Jesus to call us into repentance and to believe the Good News, but we seized him and killed him. However, God raised Jesus from the dead, so that even humanity’s violence could not stop God’s love. Jesus tells this parable in the days before his own arrest, knowing that the religious leaders of his day want to have him killed, but even death cannot stop God and the love of Christ Jesus.

The Narrative Lectionary also uses the Decalogue and the commandment given through Moses to the people. We are once again reminded that these are a people coming into newly found freedom; they had only known slavery in Egypt before. Now, they must create an identity, a way of knowing who they are, in relationship with God and with each other. The Commandments help define a people and give a set of guidelines, rules and structure for a new way of life.

Matthew 5:17 is Jesus’ own words that he has not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it. The audience of Matthew’s Gospel account were primarily Jewish, who knew the laws and traditions. These words assure the listeners that Jesus has come not to tell them they have been wrong, but rather to reform, and to hear the law in a new way. Jesus’ teachings fulfill the law, and we are called to continue to fulfill God’s commandments throughout our lives.

God plants a vineyard. God calls a people out of slavery into freedom. God gives us all a fresh start, a new chance, and God puts into place teachings and commandments and ordinances to help guide our lives. But we are always trying to do things our own way. We grow wild. We cast off the commandments because we don’t see them as ways of protecting us but as hindrances. Time and again, God calls us back to God’s ways of love, justice and mercy. Time and again, we ignore what God has created for us and look at what we don’t have and give in to the world’s ways of greed, desire and jealousy. If we could only see what we have in God instead of looking for greener grass in other vineyards, we would understand God’s commandments for us. But we still fail and turn away. Ultimately, the worst thing we could do was to kill God. However, the best thing God could do was to overcome death and sin with love.

Call to Worship

Sing praises to God, who created the heavens and the earth!

 **Sing praises to our Creator, who makes us brothers and sisters!**

Lift up your voices and hands to God, who is worthy of praise,

 **Come join together in worshiping the God who makes us one.**

Center your hearts on Christ, who calls upon us to love one another.

 **In prayer and praise and thanksgiving, we worship Jesus our Lord.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Wisdom, we have dwelled in foolish ways, turning away from You to follow the desires of the world. We have sought worldly gain over the needs of our brothers and sisters. We have given in to anger, hate and fear rather than compassion and mercy. We have jumped to conclusions rather than waiting patiently to learn. Forgive us for tagging along to the ways of the world, and turn us back to follow You. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from Psalm 139)

Where can we go from God’s spirit? Where can we flee from God’s presence? There is no place that is too far for God to find us, no place that is too dark for God’s light not to shine. We are God’s beloved. God will seek us all the days of our lives. We are forgiven, loved, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

Great God, fill our hearts with gladness for the Scriptures, for the traditions and the teachings that have been passed down to us. Fill our minds with questions so that we can challenge the ways of the world and think differently so that we can follow You with full hearts. Fill our lives with the presence of one another, that we may know our neighbors and love them as ourselves. Help us to think differently, to love deeply, and to live in peace with one another, caring for those in need as our brother and sister. In the name of Jesus the Christ, our Brother, our Friend, and our Savior, we pray. Amen.