Worship Resources for November 17th—Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 65:17-25 or Malachi 4:1-2a; Isaiah 12 or Psalm 98; Luke 21:5-19; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-13

We are nearing the end of our Lectionary cycle, and as we approach Reign of Christ Sunday on the 24th of this month, we read passages from the prophets about God doing a new thing. In Isaiah, the people who were about to return from exile and rebuild would experience God doing a new thing in their presence. God is creating a new heavens and a new earth, where the former things—the loss they have experienced, the destruction and devastation—will not be remembered. While the prophets gave hope to their people in their life time, their message also was a glimpse to something beyond them, and it is a hope we keep alive today. We dream of God’s kingdom coming, a new reign, a new heaven and earth, and more than dream—we long for it, we desire it, and we are waiting for it.

The passage from Malachi, however, also offers a vision of the day of the Lord—a day of judgment that will “burn like an oven.” Using imagery that would have been common among other surrounding cultures, God will rise like a sun with wings to pronounce judgment. Malachi is placed in the Christian Bible right before the New Testament as a precursor to the Gospels, but it was not the last of the prophets to be included as part of the Bible, so we need to be careful with interpretation based on placement in our Bibles. In this short passage, we are reminded of another vision of God’s judgment, one that comes with fire—but fire often was used to purify. A large fire burns up the dead things to allow new life to flourish. God is going to do something new. Written after the return from exile, Malachi is concerned that the people have gone back to their old ways with the new temple. They are turning away from right worship of God and have fallen away from God’s ways once again. Malachi envisions a new beginning, a starting over, and proclaims that the prophet Elijah will return to turn people back to God before the day of the Lord comes.

Isaiah 12 is offered as an alternative to a psalm reading. In other years, this is an Advent lectionary passage, a song of joy in God’s salvation. As we approach Advent, we are remembering the joy of anticipation, the waiting for Christ’s reign and we remember our joy in God for all that God has done for the people throughout history.

Psalm 98 (which was an alternative psalm for last week) sings of God victorious, and how all the earth praises God through music—people through vocal and instrumental music, and the earth through the music of the roaring seas, the clapping foods and the wind singing in the hills. All of creation praises God, who is coming to judge with equity.

Our Gospel lesson is Jesus foretelling the destruction of the temple. While Luke 21: 1-4 is often used at this time of year for stewardship, our lectionary has us reading about the very temple whose widow’s money went into the treasury. Jesus foretells that what we know will crumble. What we have built is not permanent. Jesus reminds the disciples that what is important is that they persevere, that they stay true to the Good News. Jesus knows that there will be persecutions coming for those that remain true to him, and indeed many of the early Christian leaders were martyred. But the Gospel is what stands—the truth stands, even when stones and bricks do not, even when nations fall and cities are destroyed. The Gospel will stand—the Good News of God’s love for the world will last for eternity.

2 Thessalonians 3:6-13 reminds the faithful to persevere. 2 Thessalonians is accepted by most scholars to be pseudonymous, in that it either copies 1 Thessalonians or outright contradicts it most of the time. But to a people who had waited long for the Second Coming and were realizing it wasn’t coming in their lifetime, this is a warning along with encouragement to keep doing what is right—to work for the kingdom of God. This isn’t busywork, but this is Gospel-work—loving one’s neighbors, helping one another, and working to help the community without burdening other members of the community. This work ought to be done in humility and with the spirit of generosity, not to look better than another person, and others ought to be encouraged to do their work to help.

Faithfulness over time—our work is not necessarily for us, but for the future. For the kingdom that is coming. We are nearing the edge of our church year, the brief pausing abyss between the waiting for the Second Coming, for Christ’s kingdom to come—and Advent, waiting for the birth of Christ as a reminder of waiting for Christ to do a new thing. Our faithfulness will not be fulfilled in our lifetime. We will not see the end. But we are waiting and hoping for God to do something new—to bring about a new heaven and a new earth, however that might look. We know that God will make all things new, and that the worldly things we build will crumble and fall. What will last is what is eternal: love, life, hope.

Call to Worship

Skies darken and clouds come menacing

**The Light of the World is Jesus**

The news is full of violence and fear

**The Light of the World is Jesus**

The world feels threatening and cold

**The Light of the World is Jesus**

Come, follow the Light, and share the Light

**We follow Jesus our Savior, who is our Hope**

We worship together, growing in the Light of the World

**In Christ there is no darkness at all!**

**The Light of the World is Jesus! Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Love, we confess that we have not loved our brothers and our sisters. We have not looked to Your kingdom, but have looked to building our own. We want more and more and we want bigger and bigger. We have squeezed the margins until there is nothing left. Forgive us for not looking to Your kingdom that is coming, that encompasses all, that is not full of things but full of life and the promise of hope. Your kingdom includes all of creation, all people, all of our brothers and sisters that we have squeezed out. Forgive us. Call us to open our tightly clenched fists, to let go of what we have been holding on to, and allow Your kingdom to enter in all of us. In the name of Jesus, for whom we pray for the kingdom to come, we pray all things. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God is doing something new, and it won’t look like how we want it to. But that’s ok. God will lead us through. Trust in God. Know that you are forgiven and given new life now that lasts through eternity, through all the changes that will be coming. God will see you through to the new kingdom. Amen.

Prayer

Sweet, Sweet Spirit, guide us on this journey of faith. We near the end of our church year. Christmas is so close we can taste it. We want to celebrate that You have come into our world, but first help us to understand that You are coming again. You are entering our world and our lives in a new way, and You have promised a new way of life: the Kingdom of God that is coming near. Help us to look for this new kingdom, to live into it, to help be part of it. Call us to follow the commandments to love You and to love our neighbors as ourselves in all that we are, in all that we do. In the name of Christ, who is coming again, we pray. Amen.