Worship Resources for November 22nd, 2015—Reign of Christ Sunday, Thanksgiving Sunday (USA)

Revised Common Lectionary: 2 Samuel 23:1-7 or Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14 or Joel 2:21-27; Psalm 93 or 126 or 132; 1 Timothy 2:1-7 or Revelation 1:4b-8; Matthew 6:25-33 or John 18:33-37

Narrative Lectionary: Isaiah’s Vineyard Song, Isaiah 5:1-7; 11:1-5 (Mark 12:1-3)

This is the final day of the liturgical year; next Sunday marks the first Sunday in Advent. There are many choices for readings today based on either Reign of Christ Sunday or Thanksgiving Sunday here in the United States, so I have included all of the readings with brief reflections.

We have come full circle in the first thread of the Hebrew Scriptures during this season after Pentecost, coming back to the Kings of Israel with the last words of David in 2 Samuel 23:1-7, who declares blessings to those who rule justly, ruling in the fear, or awe, of God, and God has made an everlasting covenant with David and those who reign in his line. David warns those who turn away from God that it is like throwing their crown away.

Our second thread has followed the prophets and Daniel’s vision of the heavenly kingdom, in which one with human form is given the heavenly kingship, an everlasting kingdom that will never end. For a people who had experienced the harsh occupation by the Greek Empire following the return from exile, they longed for the heavenly kingdom, for God’s reign to endure forever, because earthly kings had long ago failed them and the empires of the world continued to oppress them.

For Thanksgiving, we read from the prophet Joel, who speaks of hope after exile and occupation, of a time when God’s reign will come and the people will suffer no more. No more will the people go hungry or even starve to death, for in God’s reign there is enough for everyone, an abundance to be shared. No longer will the people wonder where God is, for God will be right there among them.

Psalm 93 sings of God as king, and God’s dominion is over all of creation, for even the waters of the floods and of the seas lift up to hear God’s call, and God is more majestic than all of the waters of creation. God is the one who established the world and is worthy of praise and majesty.

Psalm 126 sings of hope for a future time when God will restore Zion, will restore what was taken from the people, and those who have gone into exile will return home with their arms full. Even though this is a dream, the psalmist sings praise now, trusting that God will do this: God will restore the people.

Psalm 132 sings of David’s work in building the temple, that David longed for God to have a home among them, that God was the one who truly reigned over the people. God has chosen the people, and David has chosen to put his trust in God and to build the glorious temple for God to reign among the people. And as long as David’s sons adhere to the covenant, they too will reign with God among them.

1 Timothy 2:1-7 is Paul’s declaration that believers ought to make prayers of thanksgiving to God, for there is one God, and one mediator, Jesus Christ. These prayers of thanksgiving are also to be made for kings and all rulers, so that peace may prevail. Paul has come to urge the people to pray for their leaders, to pray in thanksgiving for what God is doing, so that all may come to believe.

Revelation 1:4b-8 is the second part of the introduction to John’s letter to the seven churches in Asia. John of Patmos declares that Jesus is the ruler of the kings of the earth, and that the people in the churches are part of his kingdom, made to be priests to serve him. For God is the beginning and the end. God’s reign endures forever. And John uses the image that Jesus also used in Mark 13:26 and also echoes back to Daniel, of the Son of Man coming on clouds. John is declaring that God’s reign is near.

The Gospel lesson for Thanksgiving Sunday is Matthew 6:25-33, in part of Jesus’ discourse from the Sermon on the Mount. Jesus tells the disciples that God is the one who cares for the earth, so our worries—while important to us—are pretty small in the sight of God’s entire creation. If we work for the kingdom, or the reign of God—we are working for all to have homes, for all to have food, for all to have enough—and therefore, our needs are met when we care for the needs of others.

John 18:33-37 is Jesus’ declaration to Pilate, as he is arrested, that his kingdom is not of this world. But Jesus even tells Pilate, “You say that I am a king” (vs. 37). This is a good reminder that the language we use, the terms we speak, cannot capture the understanding of what Jesus is speaking of in terms of God’s reign. Even for today, those terms of kings and kingdoms are outdated as we have few monarchies left in the world. So we also ought to recognize that the language around the reign of God is also limiting; hence Jesus declaring, “My kingdom is not of this world.” The *oikumene*, household of God—or “beloved community”—is beyond what our limited language can describe and imagine.

The Narrative Lectionary for Reign of Christ Sunday looks at the Song of the Vineyard by Isaiah. Isaiah sings of God planting a vineyard in chapter 5, and the vineyard is Israel, but the grapes have gone wild, not growing the way God has intended them to grow, so God will tear down the vineyard. However, out of the stumps of the ground in chapter 11 a shoot shall come up, a branch from the roots of Jesse, and a new king will rise, one like David who will judge with righteousness, and care for the poor, and be faithful to God.

Mark 12:1-3 is the beginning of Jesus’ parable of the wicked tenants of a vineyard. Jesus, taking from Isaiah’s vision, tells the story of the vineyard God has planted, but rather than the grapes growing wild, Jesus says rather the tenants who have been entrusted to care for the land have become wicked and gone astray.

Thanksgiving and praise belong to God, who is the creator of the heavens and earth, who is our true Sovereign. And yet, God’s kingdom is not of this world. This does not mean that God’s creation isn’t part of it, but rather the world that human beings have created—a world of corruption, where the wealthy are powerful and the poor have nothing, where worldly success is more important than caring for one’s neighbors—this world is not of God’s Reign. But we can participate in the reign of God now when we pull away from the values of this world and instead practice justice, kindness, mercy, and love for our neighbors. And we give thanks to God, who has shown us this way through his son, Christ Jesus, who is our true Sovereign, who rules by serving all, and becoming humble to the point of the cross.

Call to Worship

There will be a new heaven and a new earth;

**We are waiting for the reign of God.**

The home of God will be among us;

**We are preparing for the reign of God.**

God will wipe away every tear from our eye;

**We are expecting the reign of God.**

Death will be no more! Crying and pain and sorrow will be no more!

**Until that day comes, we are waiting, preparing, and expecting the reign of God to come.**

We gather our hearts to worship our God, who is eternal, and whose love knows no end.

**Amen and Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Sovereign God, we confess we have given idols power over us, the idols of power and wealth, fame and security. We confess we have fallen into the ways of this world and have forgotten our kindred in Christ. We have lost sight of the reign of God here on earth, and instead have allowed the idols of the world to rule over us. Forgive us. Call us into Your reign, to declare You the One who has power over us because Your power is love. Call us to love our neighbors as ourselves, and to work for justice, show mercy, and love one another in the name of Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Jesus came to us not to reign as a king over us, but to serve us, and to show us the way of God is the way of love. Jesus said the first would be last and the last would be first. Jesus called us to become humble and serve one another, and that the most important commandment was to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. This is the way of our Sovereign. Go, knowing you are forgiven, and love and serve one another, especially our neighbors in need, as Christ serves us. Amen.

Prayer

God of Abundant Love, help us to gather in those from the margins so they may know Your love. Help us to harvest Your good works in the world by doing good in this world. Help us to end hunger and poverty with the plentiful resources You have given us in this world. Call us to stop hoarding when we have plenty. Call upon us to share what we have with those in need. Create in us glad and generous hearts, so that we might give thanks and praise to You, the One who has given us everything we need. Amen.