Worship Resources for November 23rd, 2014—Twenty-Fourth Sunday after Pentecost, Reign of Christ Sunday and Thanksgiving Sunday (U.S.)

Revised Common Lectionary: Ezekiel 34:11-16, 20-24; Psalm 95:1-7a or Psalm 100; Ephesians 1:15-23; Matthew 25: 31-46

Narrative Lectionary: Jeremiah’s Temple Sermon, Jeremiah 1:4-10, 7:1-11 (Matthew 21:12-13)

We have reached the end of Year A of the lectionary cycle. The prophet Ezekiel declares that God is the Good Shepherd, and that God is the one who judges between sheep. In this case, the fat sheep are the ones who have consumed more than they need and looked to their own interests, and the lean are the ones who have gone without. But all are sheep. All are cared for by God. God’s way of justice is restoration, not punishment—though if you are used to having a lot, having it taken from you can seem like punishment. But it is restoration—giving what is due to those who have gone without. God cares for all of God’s sheep, and God shall provide for all. God will bring out the sheep, seeking the lost, and lead them to good pastures.

Psalm 95:1-7a sings of God the Creator who has made all things, the world and everything in it, and that we are the sheep of God’s hand. God has molded us and cares for us. God is the God of gods, God is the true King, and God is the one who has made us all.

Psalm 100 is a Call to Worship before entering the temple, a song of praise. Enter God’s courts with thanksgiving and praise! Again, the image of sheep and shepherd is used, and we are the sheep of God, who has made us all, and we enter the place of worship to praise our God.

Ephesians 1:15-23 contains thanksgiving for the readers, a prayer of wisdom and revelation for them, and also the declaration that all things have been placed under the feet of Christ, who has risen from the dead and reigns forever. All authority—heaven and earth, and the church, is under the feet of Christ as declared by God.

Matthew 25:31-46 concludes Jesus’ teachings before his arrest in Matthew’s account. It reads like a parable, but Jesus has told two parables—the parable of the bridesmaids and the parable of the talents—and now says that when the Son of Man comes, he will sit upon his throne of glory and separate the sheep from the goats. Whereas in Ezekiel the sheep are judged against sheep, here they are separated, sheep against goats—and the king describes those who have visited those in prison, cared for the sick, fed the hungry, clothed the naked—the ones who have taken care of the least among us have done it to God, and those who have ignored the least around them have ignored God. It’s as blunt as Jesus gets about what it truly means to love one’s neighbor. And at the end, those that the king does not know—those who did not help their neighbor, will go to eternal punishment, and the rest to eternal life. It sounds very harsh, very hellfire and brimstone. But if punishment is what justice feels like when you have had more than you should, ignored those around you for your own gain, and then have that taken away—it will be punishment. It will be hell. And those who have cared for others and looked to others needs—their needs will also be taken care of, forever.

The Narrative Lectionary contains the story of the call of Jeremiah, who was just a boy when God called him to speak, and though he is young, God tells him not to be afraid, and gives him the words to speak. When Jeremiah does speak to the people, Jeremiah links the way that the rulers treat the poor and widowed, the orphaned and oppressed among them with how they worship God. They have abandoned God, therefore they have also abandoned God’s ways which include taking care of the marginalized and oppressed. God will be with them, if they care for the least among them, for that is where God is present. They must care for the widowed and orphaned and poor among them, especially in the temple of God.

Matthew 21:12-13 contains the passage in which Jesus overthrows the tables of the moneychangers in the temple, because they are not helping the poor, but instead cheating those who are buying animals for the temple sacrifice and extorting money. The temple is supposed to be a place to worship God, but to some it has become a place to make money off of the backs of the vulnerable. Jesus literally turns the tables because of this.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, we remember that Christ is Sovereign. Christ is the one who judges each of us, so we must judge ourselves: are we following the way of Christ? Are we living into God’s ways of righteousness—mercy, justice, forgiveness, and peace? Are we looking to the well-being of the most vulnerable among us, or are we still looking out for ourselves first? Who rules our hearts—God, or our bank accounts and nest eggs?

Call to Worship

It is harvest time! God is gathering us in!

 **Come! Let us share all of our good gifts with God!**

God has planted seeds in us and now the time is ripe;

 **Come! Let us celebrate and rejoice in what God is doing in us!**

God has plans for us, plans for a future with hope.

 **Come! Let us rejoice in God’s reaping at harvest time.**

 **Let us share our gifts for the glory of God!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Sovereign God, we confess before You that we have not loved our neighbor as ourselves. We have lied to ourselves and excused our actions. We are too busy taking care of ourselves and our families. We will have time later. We don’t have enough resources to help ourselves and others. Someone else will do it. Forgive us for skirting our own responsibility, for making excuses, for not following Your commandments. Help us to come to You. Help us to end our excuses and instead to pick up the cross, put to death the things that are holding us back, and follow You. In Your name, the blessed name of Jesus, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God’s justice is restoration. God’s justice mends us all. It may be painful when we go through it, but God will see us through to the other side. You are forgiven, even when it hurts to forgive. You are loved, even when it is hard to love. Go and show mercy, compassion, and forgiveness, and live into God’s ways of righteousness, justice, and peace. Amen.

Prayer

God of Grace and Glory, God of our Beginnings and our Future, God of the Universe: we come before You in thanksgiving and praise for all You have done, for all You have made, for all You continue to do. In the uncertainty that lies before us, help us to remember that You are our Sovereign God, our Creator. You are the one who knows our hearts. Refine our hearts so that we may be pure before You. Remove the blemishes of selfishness, so that we might truly love one another as our kindred in You. And when we are worn out and spent, when we are bitter and tired, make us new. God, You are always about to do a new thing. You are our Creator, and You are creating something new in us. Create in us a new, pure heart, that loves others as Your children, our kindred, part of our own body in You. In the name of our Creator, Redeemer and Sustainer, we pray. Amen.