Worship Resources for November 25, 2012—Twenty-Sixth Sunday after Pentecost, Reign of Christ Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary: 2 Samuel 23:1-7 or Daniel 7:9-10, 13-14; Psalm 93 or Psalm 132; John 18:33-37; Revelation 1:4b-8

It is the end of the church year. Hallelujah, it is Reign of Christ (or Christ the King) Sunday!

We come to the end of having two threads of the Lectionary for the Hebrew Scriptures. Our first thread, which began after Pentecost with the history of Saul, David and Solomon, shifted in September to the Wisdom Literature, then through the Wisdom stories to Ruth, bringing us full circle. Today, we go back to David, hearing David’s last words, proclaiming that God has made an everlasting covenant, and giving light towards the future, saying that one who reigns with wisdom reigns with justice. As Christians, we focus on the reign of Christ, the kingdom (or kin-dom) of God, and that Christ reigns, leads, and shepherds us with wisdom and justice. We have hope in this leadership, for those that lead without following God’s ways are foolish and useless.

The Prophetic thread ends with Daniel, with visions of God’s court, and the reign of one like a human being. Of course, early Christians looked back on this passage as proof of Jesus’ authority and messiahship, but when we look at this passage, we see the hope of God’s reign coming to earth. We see hope that one may come who reigns in the ways of God. In a time of empires and emperors (Daniel is believed to be written during the Greek reign) it is understandable that the image of God and God’s reign is like that of a good emperor. Living today, where we understand our world to be much greater than the communities surrounding the Mediterranean, and understanding the numerous countries and different forms of government, our vision may be different. We may not see an emperor or a king ruling over us, but see Jesus as one working with us, inspiring us, guiding us to a new way of life. John offers the shepherd image (another image that arose from the Hebrew Scriptures) as a different way of thinking of God’s reign or community on earth. But what we learn from this passage in Daniel is that the reign, the rule, the way of God endures forever, and is not of this world. In many ways, it is beyond our comprehension because of this, and to use terms like king and kingdom are ways we as human beings try to grasp something much greater and beyond our understanding.

Psalm 93 declares that God is the ruler of this earth, for God is the creator. For a people concerned with having an earthly king, this psalm reminds them that there is a greater king beyond them. We are reminded that God created all of creation, and we can see God at work in our world.

Psalm 132 speaks of David’s reign and the promises of God to David. As we prepare for Advent to come upon us, we remember that the prophets often looked back to the time of David as the ideal time. Though David was a faulty human being, he is still looked upon as the ideal king, in a time when the people were united in one country. David was somehow able to bring unity despite the divisions in his own household and his own mistakes. The Messiah was understood to come from the line of David, ruling as David did, but without the mistakes of David. This reign would be perfect, and would last forever. When we think of the reign of Christ, we look back on these same passages and echo these words of hope.

John 18:33-37 refers to Jesus’ testimony when he is on trial before Pilate. On Reign of Christ Sunday we often read Jesus’ final words before he is handed over to death, where Jesus speaks of the coming reign or kingdom. Jesus tells Pilate that “my kingdom is not from this world.” When Pilate asks him if he is a king, Jesus answers, “You say that I am a king.” Jesus further answers that “Everyone who belongs to the truth listens to my voice.” Jesus is echoing back to chapter 10, in which he talks about being a shepherd, and how his sheep know his voice. Again, we are offered a different model of leadership. While in biblical times it was appropriate to refer to God and later Jesus as king, and how they would rule forever as king, there is another image that is offered that the writer of John’s gospel seized upon: the Messiah as Shepherd. One who leads by gathering the flock, keeping them safe, looking out for the lost and the least. Not a king who rules, but a shepherd who safeguards and is mindful of every one of us.

Revelation 1:4b-8 gives a glimpse of the heavenly kingdom at the beginning of this letter from John—again, a different model of a kingdom. In this vision, we are all priests who serve God in worship, not as subjects to be ruled over. This vision is so vastly different it is beyond human comprehension (as are most of the visions written in Revelation), but it is a vision of those who follow Jesus as servants and worshippers. Indeed, the vision declared in Revelation for those who are faithful is of a heavenly worship service rather than a kingdom and throne room. Plainly speaking, the reign of God is like church: where we come and worship and serve God.

From these variety of readings, we can gather that there are several visions of the heavenly reign, the kingdom of God, and several visions of what the messiah, what the Christ will be. A king like an earthly king, coming with an army of angels? An emperor like Cesar, sitting upon a throne and ruling with strength and fury? A service of worship, where the people come and serve Christ like priests? Or a shepherd, where the faithful hear the shepherd’s voice, as he leads them to safety and green pastures?

What we know is this: on this day, we celebrate God’s reign, kingdom, or community of faith, that endures forever, beyond time and beyond this world, beyond life and death. And we know that we can glimpse something of this reign here on earth, but whatever vision we have is incomplete. What we do know for certain is this: we have a role to play. We are important. We are treasured by God. And God wants us to be part of this, whatever it is, that is beyond our understanding. Following God’s ways of love, justice, and peace, we will surely be on the path to this kingdom—as Jesus told the scribe who asked him about the greatest commandments, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.”

Call to Worship (from Revelation 1):

God loves us and freed us from sin

 **God has made us part of his kingdom! Hallelujah!**

God called us to serve and worship

 **To God be the glory forever and ever, Amen!**

God is the Alpha and the Omega, the first and the last

 **Who is and who was and who is to come, the Almighty!**

We are part of the reign of God!

 **We are the body of Christ! Hallelujah! Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy, Holy, Holy, Lord God Almighty, we come to You confessing that we have tried to close off Your reign. We have put up walls to keep others out: we wanted to keep out those who looked different than us. We wanted to keep out those who loved different than us. We wanted to keep out those who lived in different places and spoke different languages. Jesus our Savior, You continue to break down the walls we build up. You continue to open doors where we think the gates are locked shut. Forgive us when we err on the side of exclusion instead of the side of love. Call us into Your reign here on earth, so that we might pursue the path of justice and mercy that leads to Your reign beyond this world. In the name of our Savior, Redeemer and Friend, Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from John 10)

Jesus is the Good Shepherd. Jesus lays down his life for us. Jesus calls out to us and we hear his voice. There is one flock, one Shepherd, who calls to us, and we are part of that flock forever. When you are lost, the Good Shepherd looks for you and will not stop until he has found you. You are forgiven. You are loved. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Community, we give You thanks for our community of faith. We are thankful for this opportunity to participate in Your work here on earth, knowing that we are part of the greater community that spans beyond time and place, beyond life and death. Guide us in our daily lives to live in Your ways of justice, mercy, forgiveness and peace. Guide us to love our neighbors and to pray for our enemies, to reach out with open hands instead of clenched fists. Open our hearts, loving God, to our neighbors in need, that we might expand the message of Your community here on earth, that all may be part, that all have a place, and that all are needed. In the name of Christ, our Guide, our Friend, and our Companion, we pray. Amen.