Worship Resources for November 26th, 2017—Reign of Christ Sunday

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

Narrative Lectionary: Jeremiah’s Letter to Exiles, Jeremiah 29:1, 4-14 (John 14:27)

God’s justice is not retributive, but restorative, as demonstrated by the prophet Ezekiel in 34:11-16, 20-24. God is the Good Shepherd who will search for the scattered sheep and bring them together, feeding them on the rich pastures of Israel. The prophet gives hope and comfort to those who have been in exile, that they will be led home. God will judge between the fat and the lean sheep, for the fat have taken all the resources and profited from injustice, while the lean have suffered. The fat have pushed their way in, but now it is time for the lean to have their needs met, and the fat will be destroyed. This may sound harsh, but going back to an earlier metaphor in Ezekiel 17, God will bring low the high tree and make the high tree low. God will take a sprig from the topmost shoot of the cedar and will plant it, and it will become a great tree that all birds will make their home in. Ezekiel reminds us that God’s justice is an evening out, a restoring of what was. Just as the high tree must be cut low, and the low tree high, so must the fat sheep become lean.

Psalm 100 calls the people into worship, for the people belong to God. God is the one who made all the earth, and made the people. As the people enter the temple, they are called to worship God with praise and thanksgiving, for God’s faithfulness endures forever.

Psalm 95:1-7a also calls the people into worship, concluding this section with a reminder that the people are the sheep of God’s hand, the people of God’s pasture. God is above all other gods, for God formed the heavens and the earth and made all the people.

Ephesians 1:15-23 introduces the writer’s understanding of Christ to the people at Ephesus (and perhaps elsewhere; there are no personal details for the church in Ephesus that many scholars believe this was a letter that was copied to several churches). The writer prays for the spirit of wisdom and revelation to be with the receiver as they hear these words. God has raised Christ from the dead and has given him power over all authority in heaven and on earth. Christ is the head of the church, and the church is the body of Christ.

The final parable in Matthew’s account culminates in Matthew 25:31-46. Jesus tells a parable that reads more like a vision of the kingdom of heaven, in which the Son of Man comes in his glory and separates the people like a shepherd separates sheep from goats. The king will judge, and those who cared for the sick and visited those in prison, clothed the naked, fed the hungry—these are the ones who will inherit the kingdom of God, because every time they did this to someone, to the least of all, they did it to Christ. And those who did not do these things will be taken to eternal punishment. It is a hard lesson, but one we must learn. We prepare the way to heaven by caring for one another on earth. When we ignore those in need around us, we ignore Christ, and we prepare our way for the end we will face, for the eternity we desire: one where we are not cared for, not loved, not known. To prepare for the eternity God desires, we must love one another.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the words of hope from the prophet Jeremiah to the people being taken into exile. Jeremiah tells the people to build their homes, to marry, to live their lives. They are to seek the welfare of the city they are living in—in other words, to become part of the neighborhood, to become part of the community, because they are going to be there a while. But to have the goodwill of the people around you, to make it your home, even if it is not the home of your heart. Jeremiah warns them not to listen to the prophets of the people, but instead to maintain faith in God and to keep hope alive, for God has plans for their welfare and not for harm, to give them a future with hope (vs. 11). God will be with them, no matter where their home is, and will be with them when they return some day.

Jesus tells the disciples before his arrest in John 14:27 that his peace is with them. The peace of Christ is not the peace of the world; Christ’s peace will not let their hearts be troubled, and they will not be afraid.

On this day, we remember that Christ is coming again, and we are preparing for that reign of Christ. As we prepare to turn to Advent, we remember that this is the crowning of the year; we have come full circle. We have come back to a place where we are still watching and waiting for signs of Christ’s return into our world and lives in a new way. We are still actively participating in building up the reign of God on earth as it is in heaven, but we know that God is at work now, that Christ is entering our world and lives in this moment, in a new way.

Call to Worship

Enter God’s house with thanksgiving!

**Enter God’s courts with praise!**

Give thanks to God;

**Bless God’s holy name.**

For God is good;

**God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

The kingdom of heaven is at hand;

**The love of Christ is ready to be born anew.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy God, we confess that we have lived as if You don’t exist. We have created lives that revolve around to-do lists and tasks, errands to be run, activities to be at, stuff to be had. We have created goals for ourselves that we believe will lead to happiness, if we worked harder, if we achieved that promotion, if we were thinner or stronger or smarter. Forgive us. You made us in Your image, and we fail to see that. You gave us hearts to love one another, and we have failed to love even ourselves as we are. Call us back into Your vision of the beloved community, on earth as it is in heaven, in which we see the face of Christ in one another. Call us back to Your love, that we might love one another. Call us back to You, that we might seek Your will and way and wisdom in our life. For there is nothing in this world that is more important than loving You, and loving our neighbor as ourselves. This we know, for Christ gave his life for this: that we might know Your love endures, in life and death, through eternity. Guide us back to You. In the name of Christ, whose reign is coming, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Lamentations 3:22-23)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God’s mercies never come to an end.

They are new every morning; great is God’s faithfulness.

Our hope is in God, and God’s hope is in you.

Go, and become the hope of God in this world, by loving others, and by forgiving others, because you are loved and forgiven in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, we come to You at this crowning of the year, as we prepare for the turning of the seasons; may we be reminded that we are working for Your reign on earth as it is in heaven. We are preparing to see the fullness of Your glory through Your Son, Jesus Christ, and that fullness is made aware in us by Your love for us. That fullness is made aware in us by the sending of Your Son to us. That fullness is made aware in us by the calling to love one another. We have not seen the fulfillment yet of Your reign on earth, but we believe and trust that it is coming, and that we are called to take part. As we prepare to enter a new year in the church, as we prepare for this season of light and hope, may we live into our call to love one another. In the name of Christ, the fullness of God’s love made known to us, we pray. Amen.