Worship Resources for November 4th—Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Ruth 1:1-18 or Deuteronomy 6:1-9; Psalm 119:1-8 or Psalm 146; Mark 12:28-34; Hebrews 9:11-14

We are coming full circle in our first thread through the Old Testament—having read the stories of David and Solomon over the summer, then switching to the Wisdom Literature, we now head back to the story of Ruth—David’s Moabite great-grandmother, and his great-great grandmother Naomi. In a time when there was a great famine, and when women only had security if they were married or had living fathers or sons, Naomi has gone to the land of Moab, her husband has died, and so have her sons. There is nothing for her in Moab. Once the famine has ended in Israel, Naomi decides to return home, and her daughter-in-law Ruth is determined to go with her. The famous passage in Ruth, her declaration to Naomi, pledges herself not only to her mother-in-law but also to the God of her husband’s people, to their land, their culture, and their heritage. This passage often is read at weddings, for it reminds us of our commitment to become one. Though there are times the Bible states not to marry outside of Israel (especially in Ezra and Nehemiah, with explicit instructions not to marry Moabites) we are reminded that there are always exceptions. Things are not so cut and dry. Our judgments of others can be challenged, along with our views of Scripture and the ways we relate to God and others. Ruth reminds us that it takes courage and faith to step out in relationship with someone who is very different than you. I am sure that in biblical times, the anecdotes told about one’s mother-in-law are not much different than today. This is a story of courage, of going against the norm, of saying “yes” to the unknown. This is a story of making the commitment of faith.

Our passage from our second thread, which has followed the prophets with passages from the Torah interspersed, reflects on the Shema, which was to be recited twice a day. As the people prepared to enter the new land, prepared to set up permanency after forty years of temporary living, God reminds them that this is what is most important: they worship the One God, the God who is One, unlike the gods of the peoples and lands around them. And what they are called to do is to love God with their whole being, to teach this to their children and to live this out in their daily lives. They are called to always remember what God has done for them, and that all they are called to do in return is to love God, for all the commandments lead up to this.

Psalm 119:1-8 praises God for the commandments and statues God has ordained. These commandments are a blessings, for they show us the way to live as God wants us to live. Those who are faithful, who seek God’s ways, will find God’s way of life to be a blessing for them, and will find that God is faithful to them.

Psalm 146 praises God for being the God of Israel—for the people put their faith in God, not in the princes, the leaders of the land. As we draw to the end of this election season, it is wise for us to remember that it is God who frees us, God who saves us, God who cares for us. We put our trust and faith in God, not in human hands.

Mark 12:28-34 recalls the Shema when Jesus is asked by the scribe which of the commandments is the greatest. Jesus does not answer from the Decalogue (the Ten Commandments) but answers from the Shema. Jesus also adds a second, not saying it is lesser or greater, but that there are no other commandments greater than these: love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself. In Mark’s version, the scribe is not trying to test Jesus, but is sincerely seeking Jesus’ wisdom, and is pleased with Jesus’ answer. Jesus replies, “You are not far from the kingdom of God.” This is the whole sum of our faith, who we are and what we are called to do—to love God and love others. Everything else is to lead to this, and if it does not, then we need to question it. The people of Israel had many commandments and statutes while they were a wandering people, needing to preserve who they were—and while they were settling. But it was clear, that as they moved from temporary to permanency, the role of commandments and ordinances changed: they were no longer to preserve a people, but help guide a people into loving God and loving others. So our faith has changed, as Christianity is no longer a minority religion (save some exceptions in the world), so we have moved from temporary to permanency, so we need to shift our thinking from rules to a way of life, from commandments to actions in faith. And that action is to love God by loving our neighbor as ourselves.

Hebrews 9:11-14 summarizes the past few week’s readings from Hebrews, that Jesus is not only the ultimate priest, he is also the sacrifice, taking the place of the blood sacrifice with his own life. Jesus changes the faith once and for all, for there is no longer a need for sacrifice as Jesus is the last and final sacrifice. Death is defeated with his resurrection, there is no longer a need for bloodshed or death.

Many people still think of religion as a set of rules to live by to please a wrathful god. Many people still think of Christianity in these terms as well. But the tables were being turned on this way of thinking long before Jesus, with the stating of the Shema: this is now to be a way of life, to love the One God, the God who is One, with our whole being. It is not about rules but a way of living. Ruth exemplifies this commitment by pledging herself to her mother-in-law and showing that the rules set at times during conflict in Israel can be broken, because it is about commitment and faith to live this way of life, not about rules. Jesus shows us that the way of loving God is to love our neighbor as ourselves. And Hebrews reminds us that the rules of old called for sacrifice and blood, but God, long ago referred to as the God of the living, the God of Abraham (and Sarah and Hagar and Keturah), Isaac (and Rebekkah), and Jacob (and Rachel, Leah, Bilhah and Zilpah), desires life. We are given commandments and ordinances and statutes as guides for our life, so that we know we are living a life pleasing to God, but what God desires most of all is for us to give our lives to God. The rules help us, but it isn’t about the rules after all. Sacrifice helped bring the Hebrew people closer to God, but in the end, it was not about sacrifice and death, but about life, which is why Christ rose, and we are promised new life now and to come.

Call to Worship

We are called to love the Lord our God

**We are called to love with all our heart and soul**

We are called to love the Lord our God

**We are called to love with all our mind and strength**

We are called to love the Lord our God

**And we are called to love our neighbor as ourselves.**

**Come, let us love our God and share God’s love in this time of worship!**

Prayer of Confession/Prayer of Brokenness

Holy One, we confess that we have been caught up in the ways of the world. Instead of looking to commandments and rules as a way to guide our life, we use them to punish and restrict others. Forgive us for our judgments and misconceptions. Forgive us for not working on ourselves, on our own lives. Call us back to Your way of life, a way of love, commitment, respect, and forgiveness. Call us back to a way of life that honors You and creation, and guides us to better love our neighbors as ourselves. In the name of Jesus the Christ, who ended sacrifice and death and fulfilled the promise of new life, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from Hebrews 8)

God has written the new covenant in our hearts. God will never leave us or abandon us, and God forgives us. God will remember our sins no longer, for we are a forgiven and renewed people. Amen.

Prayer

Eternal God, You were here before the beginning, and in You there is no end. Our lives seem to pass by at alarming speeds. Help us to slow down and enjoy this life You have given us. Help us to slow down and marvel at Your creation, so that we can express our gratitude to You. Help us to slow down and see our neighbors in need, and fulfill the call to love our neighbors as ourselves, for in doing so, we best live out our love for You. Guide us in ways of living out Godly-time, instead of worldly-time, so that we may gain a wise heart as the Psalmist declares. In Your wisdom, beauty, and majesty, may we live in awe and wonder. Amen.