Worship Resources for December 18th, 2016—Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 7:10-16; Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus’ Birth Announced, Luke 1:26-49 (Psalm 113 or 113:9)

Israel is under attack by two other kings, and God has told King Ahaz to ask for a sign. But King Ahaz does not want to test God. The prophet Isaiah is a bit exasperated with the king’s reluctance to do what God has told him to do, but assures Ahaz there is a sign: a young woman will have a child who they will call Immanuel, and those other two kings will be gone. God is doing something new, and the fears of old will pass away. This passage was cited by the writer of Matthew’s Gospel account of Jesus’ birth, but in the context of Isaiah, we understand that the prophet was sharing a message of hope, a sign, for the people of his time.

Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 calls upon God to be the people’s savior. The psalmist cries out that the people are suffering, that they are humiliated before their neighbors and enemies. The psalmist calls out for God to save them—by empowering the one at God’s right hand—in other words, a mighty warrior or king. The people will never turn back if God saves them, the psalmist promises.

Paul introduces himself at the beginning of his letter to the Romans in 1:1-7 as a servant of Jesus Christ, and declares that Jesus was promised by God through the prophets, and descended from David according to the flesh but is the Son of God according to the spirit. Paul also declares that they belong to Christ now, and were sent among the Gentiles, which is the primary focus of his letter to the Roman church, to show them how the Gentiles are now included in the promises of God fulfilled through Christ.

Matthew 1:18-25 contains the writer of Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth. Markedly different from Luke, Matthew’s account is shadowed in fear and suspicion. Luke follow Mary and her experience, but Matthew follow Joseph. Joseph is engaged to Mary, but finds out she is pregnant and plans to end the engagement, but he will do so quietly so as not to expose her to disgrace. But the angel of the Lord comes to Joseph in a dream and tells him, “Do not be afraid.” The child is from the Holy Spirit, and will be named “He Saves” (the literal meaning of Jesus, the Greek form of Joshua). There are no shepherds, no multitude of the heavenly host, no manger and no journey to Bethlehem in this account. Rather, it is the “less flashy, more soap-opera drama” version of Jesus’ birth narrative.

The Narrative Lectionary also focuses on Jesus, but from Luke’s account of the announcement to Mary, Elizabeth’s proclamation, and the beginning of Mary’s Magnificat. The angel Gabriel just shows up, appears to Mary, and greets her, and tells her she will conceive a child from the Holy Spirit. Mary is perplexed, but overall takes the news well. She then travels to visit her cousin Elizabeth, also miraculously blessed with pregnancy, and the child in Elizabeth’s womb leaps for joy when Mary enters, and Mary sings with joy, praising God who has looked upon her with favor—who has chosen her, of all people.

Psalm 113 sings praise and blessings to God who restores what has been taken. God raises up the poor from the dust, the needy from the ash heap, and makes them equal to the princes in the land. The image of God bringing children to women who could not conceive is a well-known story repeated throughout the Bible, symbolic of securing a future. In other words, this psalm praises and proclaims that God is above all, that God who created the universe is also the God of the people, and God cares for them and all of their needs.

For the people of the first century, under the rule of Rome, under the local rule of the Herodians who did not have the people’s interests at heart, they longed for a king like David, but also longed for someone to speak to them like the prophets of old. They longed for someone to tell them that God’s promises would be fulfilled, that God was going to do something new. And when Jesus came along, they looked back for signs of how God had worked through their ancestors. Miraculous conceptions and births. Promises of newborn kings who would lead the people in a new way. And so, we are now waiting and hoping expectantly for what God is birthing new in this world, and in our lives. We are waiting for the return of Christ in an unexpected way, so we read the birth narratives over and over again, year after year, as the people read the prophets of old. We read the old, old stories, and look for the newness of God to break through.

Call to Worship

We are waiting for the birth of the Christ-child;

**We are waiting for Jesus, the One Who Saves, to come again.**

We are waiting for the angels to sing, for the shepherds to come;

**We are waiting for Jesus, who is Emmanuel, God With Us.**

We are waiting for the wise men to come from the east with their gifts;

**We are waiting for Jesus to be born again in our hearts.**

Come, for our time of waiting is almost complete;

**Come, worship Christ, for Christ is coming again,**

**into our hearts, into our world, in new and glorious ways!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We confess to You, God of our Ancestors, that we are still searching for the same things our ancestors sought You for: protection, guidance, love and assurance. We still long to know that we will live in eternity with You, that You will see us through whatever troubles lie ahead. We still are waiting for peace to come and for Your kingdom, Your reign, Your beloved community to overtake us so that we will fight no more, struggle no more. And we confess that the feelings of hope and joy and peace that we have right now may fade in another month. We are still people of chronological time. Help us to move to Kairos time, to know that Advent is the season we are all expectantly waiting in, no matter what time of year. May we continue to participate in the coming of Your beloved community, Your reign on earth as it in heaven, knowing that You have already come, and are at work in each of us now. In the name of Christ, who was born, and who is coming again, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God has assured us through the prophets that restoration will come. God has assured us through Christ that resurrection is at hand. God has assured us through the Holy Spirit that new life begins now. Go, be full of the Spirit, know Jesus Christ as Savior, and believe that God’s love is with you always, because it is. Simply be. Simply love. Simply go with God and share the Good News. Amen.

Prayer

God of Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love, we know that You are continuing to work in our world to bring all things into the fulfillment of Your glory. We know that You are at work in each of us. Help us to let go of the ways of the world that revolve around numbers, whether they be seconds, hours, minutes or days, or the numbers of the stock market, or the numbers needed to achieve some goal—for You are beyond measure. Help us to let go of what is countable, and turn instead to what is unmeasurable—Your love and grace through Jesus Christ. For it is in Christ’s name that we have all hope, all peace, all joy, and all love. Amen.