Worship Resources for December 20th, 2015—Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7 (or Luke 1:46b-55, also an addition to the Gospel reading); Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-55

Narrative Lectionary: Zechariah’s Song, Luke 1:5-13, 57-80 (Psalm 113)

On this last Sunday of Advent, we begin with the words of the prophet Micah, speaking hope to a people who had seen the northern kingdom of Israel fall and dreaded the worst coming to Judah. Micah speaks of a king, one who will rule as if from of old, like David, from Bethlehem. This king will be like a shepherd, one who will not lead the people astray, but will lead them back to God. Not only will he be great, but he will be the one of peace.

Psalm 80:1-7 calls upon the Shepherd of Israel to come, for God to save the people who have suffered at the hands of their enemies and have experienced humiliation. The psalmist feels that God is angry with the people’s prayers, and pleads for God to answer, because the people have gone astray once again.

Hebrews 10:5-10 speaks of the Incarnation of Christ, which does away with the system of sacrifice. Reflecting back on the prophets that denounced burnt offerings and sacrifices, the writer of Hebrews sees God as doing away with the system by bringing forth Jesus, who through his body becomes the final and ultimate sacrifice, once for all.

Luke 1:39-55 (a portion of which may be an alternate for the Psalm) contains Mary’s visit to her cousin Elizabeth, who is pregnant with John the Baptist, and the child in her womb leaps for joy when Mary is present. Both women praise God, first Elizabeth through her blessing of Mary, and Mary through the Magnificat, her song of praise (which echoes the song of praise from Hannah in 1 Samuel 2, after she conceived and gave birth to the prophet Samuel). Mary’s song sings of God’s justice, a restorative justice in which the powerful are brought down and the lowly are lifted up; the hungry are filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. These images echo Ezekiel 17:24 in which the high trees are brought down and the low trees raised up. This is God’s justice, and what God will do.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the story of Zechariah and tells the story of how Zechariah and Elizabeth had no children—a common story in the Hebrew scriptures—and the birth of John the Baptist. Zechariah sings a song of blessing to God, because of what God has done for the people, in raising up a mighty savior, who will lead the people in the way of peace. John will be the prophet of the Most High, and God will rescue the people from the hands of their enemies, so the people will serve God without fear. In the birth of Jesus, there is no need for fear, and there is rejoicing and the knowledge of God’s peace.

Psalm 113 sings praise to God who raises up the poor and lifts up the needy to make them equal with princes. The psalm also sings that God is the one who gives children to the barren (a common theme in the Hebrew Scriptures) but before that, that God is the one who gives the barren woman a home. In biblical times, if you could not have children you were seen as worthless. So were the poor and the orphans. God lifts up the poor, and provides a home for the barren—God finds those that are seen worthless the most valuable.

In our world of violence and fear, it is important to remember that God has already rescued us from our enemies (Zechariah’s Song), so we can worship God without fear. There is no need to live in fear, but rather, to rejoice in what God is doing in the world. What God is doing, however, is turning the world we know upside down: lifting up the lowly, bringing down the powerful, filling the hungry with good things and setting the rich away empty. God is calling us into the way of justice and peace, which is radical, challenging, and life transforming.

Call to Worship

With Hope, we have waited for the birth of the Christ-child;

 **We wait for Christ to be born in us today.**

With Peace, we pray for the world, we pray for our communities;

 **The Prince of Peace reigns in our hearts.**

With Joy, we expectantly prepare for the Good News of the Messiah;

 **Joyfully we celebrate that Christ is coming again.**

With Love, we give selflessly, knowing God has given us the most wonderful gift;

 **God’s love is in us, through the gift of Jesus the Christ.**

In this time of worship,

 **May Hope, Peace, Joy, and Love shine forth from us to the world, through Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, enter into our lives and repair the divisions we have created. Enter into our world and lead us out of the ways of violence and into the ways of peace. Enter into our heart and heal our wounds of hatred and bitterness, to fill us again with hope. Come into our lives, Lord Jesus. Come and be born in us today. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from the last verse of *It Came Upon the Midnight Clear*)

*For lo, the days are hastening on, by prophet seen of old,*

*When with the ever-circling years shall come the time foretold;*

*When peace shall over all the earth its ancient splendors sing*

*And the whole world send back the song which now the angels sing.*

Live into God’s reign of peace, and share the peace of Christ with the world. Know God’s forgiveness, and share the forgiveness found in Christ with your neighbors. Know God’s love, and embrace God’s love in your heart, and in the world. Amen.

Prayer

Loving Christ, we are waiting for You to come into our lives and our world in a new way. We have waited for so long. Help us to remember that we are called to join in Your work in this world. Guide us into the ways of peace. Call upon us to join in the work of Your justice and restoration in this world. As we prepare for Christmas, and sing the carols, and celebrate with joy, remind us that the work is not yet complete, but that You are coming again, and anticipate with awe and wonder while participating in Your work in this world. Amen, and Amen.