Worship Resources for December 22nd, 2019—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: Zechariah’s Song, Luke 1:5-13, (14-25), 57-80; Psalm 113

Ahaz, the grandson of King Uzziah of Judah, was afraid of Israel and Aram, who had come to attack Jerusalem. But God told the prophet Isaiah to go with his son to speak to Ahaz. Ahaz was afraid of what God was asking of him, but Isaiah told him that God would give him a sign: the young woman would conceive and bear a son, who would be called Immanuel, God is with us. The newborn babe is a new king, a new hope for Ahaz and for all the people.

The psalmist pleads with God in Psalm 80:1-7, 17-19 for the people to be restored. They have faced great hardship, and their enemies have gained ground. The psalmist calls upon God to save them, to give them life, and the people will call upon God’s name.

The beginning of Paul’s letter to the church in Rome begins with Paul’s declaration that he is a servant of Jesus Christ, sent to declare the Gospel. Jesus Christ is the Son of God, descended from David according to the flesh, but declared the Son by the power of the Spirit and his resurrection from the dead. Paul announces he has been sent to share the Gospel with the gentiles, to bring about “the obedience of faith.” He concludes his salutation with a conventional greeting, but names Jesus Christ as Lord.

The Gospel according to Matthew begins with a genealogy, from Abraham to Joseph. Matthew is convinced that Jesus Christ is the Messiah, and that he was prophesied by the prophets of old. After the genealogy, to place Jesus in the line of David, the writer turns to the birth of Jesus the Messiah by telling how Joseph was engaged to Mary, but found her to be with child. While Luke tells the story from the point of view of Mary, Matthew looks through Joseph’s eyes. Joseph is a righteous man, and does not want Mary exposed to public scorn when he learns she is pregnant. But instead of divorcing her, in a dream he is told by an angel not to be afraid. The child is conceived from the Holy Spirit, and that they are to name the boy Jesus, for he will save the people from their sins. The writer of Matthew then includes a citation from Isaiah 7:14, that a young woman will conceive and bear a son, and they will call him Emmanuel, God with us. When Joseph awoke from his dream, he married Mary, and she gave birth to a son and named him Jesus.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the priest Zechariah and his song in Luke 1. Zechariah, a priest in the temple who was married to Elizabeth, encounters an angel of the Lord. Zechariah and Elizabeth had longed for a child, but had been unable to conceive. The angel tells Zechariah that Elizabeth will bear a son, and they are to name him John. Their child will be filled with the Holy Spirit, and will turn the hearts of many to God, to help prepare the people. But Zechariah asked how he would know this was to be, because he and Elizabeth were old. The angel reveals that they are Gabriel, and they stand in the presence of God, and were sent to speak to Zechariah and bring good news. But since Zechariah didn’t believe the angel’s words, Zechariah is rendered mute until the day the child is named after birth. Once the child was born, and on the 8th day when he was being circumcised, Elizabeth declared the boy’s name was John. When they questioned Zechariah, because it was unusual to not name a child after the father or someone in the family, Zechariah wrote, “his name is John,” and was finally able to speak, because he fulfilled what Gabriel had told him. Then he sang his great song of praise to God, for his son who was the prophet of the Most High, and for the one who would come, the Mighty Savior.

Psalm 113 is a psalm of blessing praising God, who is above all nations. There is none like our God, who looks down from on high, and lifts up the poor and needy, making them to “sit with princes.” God is the one who takes notice of those who are unable to have children, who brings good news for all, and raises up those who have been left out, bringing in those on the margins, and making them equal to rulers.

Christmas is almost here. We have new hope in God, for God came into our world and our lives in an unexpected way. God is doing something new, in us, now. We may act like Zechariah, questioning if this could really happen, because all we’ve known is pain and loss. We may act like Joseph, afraid that what should be good news isn’t good news for us. We may be like Ahaz, afraid that everything good will fall apart—but lo, something new is about to be born. We can be like Elizabeth and Mary, accepting that God is with us now, and asking us to participate in the reign, now. And though hardship will still befall us, what is new cannot be undone. What is born cannot be unborn. God is breathing new life into us, and into our world. Watch and wait: it is being revealed, right now.

Call to Worship

The time has drawn near.

**We watch, we wait expectantly, for the Good News of God.**

A child has been born for us, a son given to us:

**Emmanuel, God is With Us.**

For long ago we were promised that God would dwell with us forever;

**The Word became Flesh and lived among us.**

As we wait for Christmas, we wait for Christ to come again.

**Jesus, the One Who Saves, be born in us today. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We confess, O God, that we are an impatient people. We are terrible at waiting. We want everything to be saved, right now. We want You to return as we expect You to return. We want to believe we are right and others are wrong. We desire justification instead of justice. Renew our hearts, O God, so that we might have hope. Grant us Your peace, O God, so that we might become more patient for what needs to wait, and pursue justice, even when it disturbs us out of our comfort. Call us to rejoice, knowing that You make all things new. In Your great love for us, O God, help us to know You are at work in all times, in all things. As Advent draws to a close, help us to wait, to watch, and to know Your hope is at work in our lives, for You are entering our world in a new way, right now. In the name of Christ, who lived, died, lives again, and is with us always, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Look! She has born a Savior! Emmanuel, God With Us. The Word Became Flesh and dwelled among us. Jesus, the One Who Saves. God has come to us as one of us. God has become as vulnerable as all of us, to love us. Know this: you are loved, just as you are, wholly and completely you. There is nothing that can separate you from the love of God in Christ Jesus. We are all flawed and fractured, busted and broken and bruised—and God loves you. Know God’s love in your life, and share this love with one another. That’s all we have to do, and all we must do, in every breath. Know that you are loved, and love one another. For in this love, we know forgiveness and peace. Amen.

Prayer

O Come, Thou Wisdom from on high, and order all things far and nigh. To us the path of knowledge show, and cause us in her ways to go. O Come, Thou Wisdom, enter our lives and teach us how to live with the Good News that Jesus Christ is born again, in our hearts and in our world. Help us to heed the prophets of old and their cry for justice. Call us to listen to the stories that teach us of God’s great love that comes to us among the animals and the shepherds. Guide us to the songs of the angels, who lay down the weapons of war to sing peace on earth and goodwill to all. May we find that song in our hearts, in the rhythm of the rocking cradle. O Come, Thou Wisdom from on high, and call us to rejoice, for God is with us, Emmanuel. Amen.