Worship Resources for December 23, 2018—Fourth Sunday of Advent

Revised Common Lectionary: Micah 5:2-5a; Psalm 80:1-7 or Luke 1:46b-55; Hebrews 10:5-10; Luke 1:39-45 (46-55)

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus as Immanuel, Matthew 1:18-25 (Psalm 23:1-4, or verse 4 only)

The prophet Micah speaks of a new king, a shepherd king, in 5:2-5a. This shepherd king will not come from the other kings of Jerusalem, but will come from Bethlehem, among the unknowns, just as David did. This is a king who shall rule in the ways of God, who shall lead the people in peace.

Psalm 80:1-7 speaks of God as the Shepherd of Israel, the one who sits on the throne and who leads the people. The people have faced many enemies, facing scorn and ridicule. The psalmist cries out for God to remember the people, to come and save them from their misery as well as their enemies.

The epistle reading from Hebrews 10:5-10 speaks of Christ coming into the world, Christ being among us, God with us. God doesn’t desire sacrifices and offerings, but rather God has come in human form: in a body like ours Christ has come to do God’s will, and Christ has offered himself once for all.

The Gospel reading is from Luke 1:39-55, Mary’s visit to Elizabeth (vs. 46-55 may be substituted for the Psalm). Elizabeth’s own child in her womb leaps for joy, and calls Mary the mother of her Lord. And in response, Mary sings the Magnificat, her son of praise to God, which draws its roots from the Song of Hannah in 1 Samuel 2:1-10. Mary’s song speaks of God’s justice, what God has done for her. God has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. God has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. God’s justice is restorative—taking from those who have much and giving to those who have none. Mary knows that this is coming, for she, a lowly one, is carrying the child of God within her.

The Narrative Lectionary looks at Matthew’s account of the birth of Jesus. Contrasting with Luke’s account, instead of the angel visiting Mary, an angel visits Joseph in a dream and tells her that the child she is carrying is from the Holy Spirit—for Joseph was about to divorce her. The angel tells him “do not be afraid.” Matthew also links the story of Jesus’ birth with Isaiah 7:14, where the prophet Isaiah speaks of the new king being born in Israel. However, the rest of the context of chapter 7 shows us that Isaiah was speaking to the people of his day; but we find a common hope in this verse: a hope for a new, unexpected king sent by God.

Psalm 23:1-4 is the beginning of the Shepherd Psalm, attributed to David. God is our shepherd who leads us to still waters and restores us, and walks with us through the darkest valley. Verse 4 especially reminds us that in the darkest of times, we will fear no evil, for God is right beside us to comfort us.

God calls forth kings from the ranks of shepherds instead of nobility. God calls forth singers of justice from among the poor and the outcast, unmarried pregnant teenagers and women too old to do anything (as perceived in that time period). God is with us, Emmanuel. God isn’t teaching us a new way of being religious, but a new way of thinking of God: God has a body. God is one of us, among us. Do not be afraid, for God is doing something new. Even though God’s justice can be scary—brining down the powerful from their thrones and sending the rich away empty—it’s a song of praise for the poor and marginalized. The time has come, and God is doing something new and unexpected.

Call to Worship (from Luke 1:46-55)

Our souls magnify the Lord,

 **And our spirit rejoices in God our Savior.**

For God has looked with favor upon us, and called us blessed;

 **For the Mighty One has done great things for us, and holy is God’s name.**

God scatters the proud, brings down the powerful, sends the rich away empty;

 **God lifts up the lowly, fills the hungry with good things.**

God is with us; God remembers the promises made to our ancestors;

 **God is entering our world and our lives again in a new way.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

We confess, O God, that we have not heeded the call of Mary, the call to do justice and extend mercy, as You have extended mercy to us. We confess, O God, that the words of Mary are challenging, even frightening, when we ponder them. We confess, O God, that Mary speaks of what You will do in scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful from their thrones, and sending the rich away empty. We confess, O God, that at times we are the proud, the powerful, and the rich. We come before You, O God, remembering Your Son who came into the world and filled the hungry with good things, who lifted up the lowly. May we live into Your ways of justice, even when it is hard, and heed the call of Mary this Advent and Christmas. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

The Mighty One has done great things for us, and holy is God’s name. Christ has come, and Christ will come again, into our world and our lives in a new way. Despite the challenges and suffering we experience, we hold on to this hope: God made promises to our ancestors, and God makes promises to us. God will see us through. Go in peace, serve God, love and forgive one another. Amen.

Prayer

God of Wonder and Mystery: it is almost Christmas. We watch and wait for the Christ-child to be born, as we watch and wait for signs of Your coming into our world and our lives in an unexpected way. Call us to be with the lowly, the marginalized, the poor and the hungry. Call us to work in solidarity with the oppressed, rather than simple acts of charity that make us feel good. Call us to remember the young girl with child, who faced scrutiny and persecution. Call us to remember a people under the rule of empire, desperately waiting for change. Call us to remember how You came into our world and pulled the rug out from under us, and that You’re about to do it again. Call us to remember, so we may be ready. Call us into Your labor and delivery of the new reign on earth as it is in heaven. Amen.