Worship Resources for December 27th, 2020—First Sunday of Christmas

Revised Common Lectionary

First Sunday after Christmas Day: Isaiah 61:10-62:3; Psalm 148; Galatians 4:4-7; Luke 2:22-40

New Year’s Day: Ecclesiastes 3:1-13; Psalm 8; Revelation 21:1-6a; Matthew 25:31-46

Narrative Lectionary: Simeon and Anna, Luke 2:21-38 (Psalm 131)

The Revised Common Lectionary begins the readings for the first Sunday in the twelve days of Christmas, with the prophet Isaiah speaking a promise to the people in Isaiah 61:10-62:3. The prophet praises God, who has honored the prophet like both a groom and bride, prepared for a celebration. The prophet promises to continue to speak on behalf of God until Jerusalem is known throughout the nations for what God has done for the people. Jerusalem itself is the crown jewel in God’s hand, and will shine for all nations.

The psalmist calls all of creation, the heavens and earth, to praise God in Psalm 148. The psalmist begins with all things in the heights: sun, moon, shining stars, and the angels. The psalmist praises God for the boundaries God has set between the heavens and the earth, the sea and the land. Even the sea creatures of the great deep are called to praise God, the monsters that lurk, along with the wind and snow and fire and hail—all the things that we might fear, were created to fulfill God’s command. Mountains, hills, trees, wild animals and domesticated cattle, all people—including kings and princes, young and old, everyone—are called to praise God. Everything in the order of Genesis 1 is called to praise God, and the psalmist concludes with a call to the people of Israel to remember that they are close to God.

This portion of Paul’s letter to the church in Galatia speaks of Christ, born of a woman and born under the law, reminding the Galatians that Jesus came as one of them, and was born a Jew as they were. While Paul is writing that Jews and Gentiles both can receive the promises of God, here Paul is writing to the Galatians, who were Jewish, that they are also adopted and heirs of the promise because of Jesus, not because of the law, in his view.

Luke 2:22-40, which is also the reading for the Narrative Lectionary (which contains vs. 21 about Jesus’ circumcision and naming) contains the story of Jesus’ presentation in the temple after his birth. Jesus was dedicated in the temple following Mary’s completion of the purification cleansing, and Simeon, a righteous man who believed he would see the Messiah before he died, took Jesus in his arms and blessed him. Simeon also shared a word of warning to Mary that a sword would pierce her soul, for many would oppose him. The prophet Anna, who remained in the temple every day after her husband died began to praise God and shared the good news about Jesus to everyone. The Narrative lectionary ends at vs. 38, but the RCL continues with vs. 39-40, that Mary and Joseph fulfilled all that was required of them by the law, and they returned home to Nazareth in Galilee to raise Jesus.

The lectionary readings for the New Year begin with Ecclesiastes 3:1-13, a poem about the turning of the seasons. A time to be born, and a time to die, a time to plant, a time to pluck up. The poem goes on, ending in a time for war, and a time for peace. Then the author turns to the question of life—what does it all mean? What are we living and working for? The author concludes that the purpose of life is to find enjoyment now, for even though we understand there is a past and a future, we cannot comprehend what God has done and will do. God’s gift to us is to eat, drink, and find enjoyment in our work in this life.

The psalmist praises God for all of creation in Psalm 8, and wonders why God made human beings? When the psalmist looks at the works of God, what are mortals that God is mindful of them? Yet God has made human beings a little lower than the angels, and given humanity dominion over the earth and creation, in the way God has dominion over everything.

John of Patmos has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21:1-6a. There is no boundary of heaven and earth any longer. The new Jerusalem has come down, and God will dwell with human beings forever, wiping every tear from our eye. Death and mourning will be no more, for everything old has passed away, and God has made everything new, for God is the beginning and the end.

Matthew 25:31-46 was also the lectionary reading on Reign of Christ Sunday. Jesus’ final parable (or allegorical story—it’s disputed whether this is a parable, but in any case, it is his final teaching before his betrayal, arrest, and death) is one in which the Son of Man is seated on the throne. The people are separated, like sheep are separated from goats. Those who have fulfilled the commandment to love their neighbor as themselves by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, caring for the sick and visiting the imprisoned are welcomed into the heaven that was prepared from the beginning, for they have cared for the least among them, and therefore, cared for Christ. But for those who did not do these things, they did not do these to Christ, and therefore, they will go to the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels. As I wrote back on November 22nd, God’s intention was the heaven that was prepared for the beginning, but the consequences of our actions when we do not follow God’s ways lead to suffering.

The Narrative Lectionary also focuses on the story of Simeon and Anna (see above). The secondary reading of Psalm 131 is a very brief three-verse prayer. The psalmist turns inward, quieting themselves like a weaned child no longer in need of their mother’s milk. They wait for God, and call upon their people to wait for God in humility.

The last Sunday of 2020. The first Sunday in Christmas, the Sunday before New Year’s. The dedication of Jesus in the temple, the blessings received by Simeon and the proclamation of Anna lead us to new hope, though we know those wonderful blessings Mary heard and received will come with a cost. We long for the day when everything is made new, when the mess that has been and still is 2020 will be long in the past and we have brighter and better days. Perhaps, what we may need to do is find the blessing of God right now in this moment as Simeon and Anna did, and find the moments every day, as much as possible.

(For New Year’s Day)

Call to Worship

**We look to the past with gratitude,**

 **We look to the future with hope.**

**We have been through a difficult year,**

**We remember that God is present with us, now.**

**As we prepare for resolutions and renewal,**

 **May we seek a new understanding of ourselves.**

**May we seek a deeper relationship with God,**

 **Turning to Jesus Christ our Lord.**

(For the First Sunday of Christmas)

**Call to Worship**

**Joy to the World!**

 **Come and worship Christ, the newborn king!**

**Peace on earth, and mercy mild,**

 **God and sinners reconciled!**

**All is calm, and all is bright,**

 **For Jesus Christ is Born!**

**We sing our carols, we sing our praise,**

 **For the Creator of these days,**

 **Our Savior of the world is here!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of All Seasons, we come to You in the waning of this year. We confess it has been miserable. None of us could have seen a year ago that a pandemic was coming. None of us could see the hardship, the suffering, the loss of jobs, the despair, the panic, and the death that so many have experienced. We confess our brokenness to You, O God. Our broken systems that are supposed to help the least among us have failed. We confess our broken social systems that keep us from finding new ways of reaching out and connecting with others. We confess that this year was hellish, O God. We pray for Your wisdom and guidance to lead us into this new year, learning from the past, finding the moments that were good, and pushing ourselves to live into Your ways. Help us to repair what has been broken, O God. Help us to restore ways of caring for the most vulnerable. Guide us to repairing or planting new communities that live into Your ways of love, justice, and healing. And lead us into ways of deep compassion and empathy to care for our neighbors in need. We pray all these things in the name of our Savior, Jesus Christ our Lord, who leads us into life. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

A new year is dawning, a new hope. Every day is a new day. Jesus’ first sermon was Repent, and Believe in the Good News. Repent simply means to turn back. Turn back to God and believe that you are a new creation, made in God’s image, and you are fiercely loved. Share the good news of God’s love with the world, and know that we all have a fresh start in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Prayer

Savior Christ, we give You praise in this Christmas season. May we continue to share in the spirit of joy and peace with one another. May we brighten someone else’s day with good cheer. May we fill the hungry with good things however we can, whenever we can. May we carry the spirit of this season each and every day in our hearts, for You came to us as one of us. You were born as we were born. You cried as each of us cried, and You loved and were loved, as we have loved and continue to love. Each and every day, may we remember that unto us is born a Savior, Christ our Lord. Amen.