Worship Resources for December 29th—First Sunday after Christmas

Revised Common Lectionary:

1st Sunday after Christmas: Isaiah 63:7-9; Psalm 148; Hebrews 2:10-18; Matthew 2:13-23

Holy Name of Jesus: Numbers 6:22-27; Psalm 8; Galatians 4:4-7 or Philippians 2:5-11; Luke 2:15-21

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

Narrative Lectionary: Beginning of Good News, Mark 1:1-20 (Psalm 91:9-12)

There are three choices for this day in the Revised Common Lectionary.

For the First Sunday after Christmas, we begin with Isaiah. The prophet declares it was God who saved the people, not a messenger or angel, in Isaiah 63:7-9. The prophet recounts what God has done for the people who have returned from exile. Out of love, God has rescued them, God alone.

The psalmist calls the people to worship by praising God in Psalm 148. The psalmist begins by calling the heavens and heavenly beings, the stars and moon and sun, and the water of the heavens (the firmament described in Genesis 1), into praise of God. The psalmist thanks God for the boundaries God set between the heavens and the earth, then moves to the deep: calling upon the sea creatures to praise God. All of creation—the wind and rain, mountains and trees, all animals and all peoples—all are called to praise God, because all were made by God. The psalmist lastly sings praises to all the faithful, for the people who are faithful—the people of Israel—are close to God.

The writer of Hebrews declares that Jesus is our brother, suffering with us, and through him, we share in his death and resurrection. Jesus came not to help the angels, but human beings, the descendants of Abraham. Jesus became like us, and became both the perfect high priest and sacrifice of atonement. Jesus’ death and resurrection ends the sacrificial system and priesthood. Because Jesus was also tested and suffered, Jesus is able to help us, because Jesus knows what we have been through.

The Lectionary pushes past Epiphany to the escape to Egypt and the slaughter of the innocents in Matthew 2:13-23 (the Day of the Holy Innocents in the Catholic tradition is December 28th). Once again, Joseph is warned in a dream—this time, to take the child and his mother and to flee to Egypt. When Herod realizes that the Magi are not returning to him, he orders the death of all children ages two and younger—mirroring the slaughter of the Israelite children by Pharaoh in Egypt. But after Herod’s death, Joseph is told they can return to Israel in a dream. But since Herod’s son was now ruling there, Joseph is warned in another dream to go to Nazareth, where Jesus will grow up. The writer of the gospel of Matthew misinterprets the phrase Nazorean, believing it means that the messiah is from Nazareth, rather than understanding that a Nazorean, like Samson in the book of Judges, is someone set apart for God.

For The Holy Name of Jesus (feast day is January 1st), the Lectionary begins with the blessing God told Moses, to have Aaron share with the people in Numbers 6:22-27. This benediction for peace comes when the people put God’s name on them—in other words, they declare that they belong to God, and God will bless them.

The psalmist praises God in awe in Psalm 8. God made the universe and all creation, and the psalmist ponders why God is mindful of human beings, why God cares about us. God made us a little lower than God, and gave us dominion over the world, to care for all creatures and to be good stewards of the resources of the earth. How amazing and majestic is God, the psalmist declares.

Paul states in Galatians 4:4-7 that all have received adoption as children to God through Jesus, who has redeemed all. Paul declares that the people are no longer slaves but children and heirs through God.

The alternate Epistle reading from Philippians contains an ancient church confession: Jesus was the same form as God, but did not exploit who he was. Instead, Jesus emptied himself, taking the form of a human, and dying on a cross as one of us. However, he was raised and is exalted, and his name is now above all names. So all should bow and confess at the name of Jesus that he is Lord—not because he “lorded” it over us, but because he became like one of us and died as one of us.

The shepherds visit Jesus in Luke 2:15-21, after receiving the word from the angels. They go to witness for themselves, and share with Mary and Joseph when they find them all that the angels had told them. But Mary treasures all these words and ponders them in her heart. The shepherds return to their fields, glorifying and praising God, for what they had been told was what they witnessed: the birth of Christ. Jesus was taken on the eighth day by his parents to the temple, as all Jewish males were, to be circumcised, and he was given the name that the angel told Mary: Jesus.

The Revised Common Lectionary for New Year’s Day begins with the poem in Ecclesiastes, how there is a time for every season under heaven. The writer, the Teacher, speaks of how everything turns in season, and how they have concluded that God desires us to find the best, to be happy and enjoy ourselves as long as we live. There are times to mourn and times to laugh, and we take it in stride. It is a gift from God to enjoy ourselves and to take pleasure in our work.

The New Year’s Day lectionary shares Psalm 8 with the Holy Name of Jesus feast day (see above).

John of Patmos has a vision of a new heaven and a new earth in Revelation 21:1-6a. After the end of death and hell, everything is made new. There is no more sorrow and crying, no more death. God is with the people, and they know that God is with them, comforting them. God is the A to Z, the beginning and the end.

Before Jesus is arrested, he tells this parable in Matthew’s gospel account of the final judgment, when the sheep are separated from the goats. The writer makes it clear that those who live out their faith—visiting the imprisoned, caring for the sick, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, welcoming the stranger—these are the ones who will enter the reign of God. It doesn’t matter if they knew that was what they were doing when they took care of the least among them, what matters is that they did it. On the other hand, those who didn’t care for the sick, visit the imprisoned, etc—those who did not live out their faith—they will receive eternal punishment, but the righteous will receive eternal life. It is a harsh ending to this parable, but a reminder that how we live now matters. It is not all about life after death, but about how we live this life now.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the beginning of the Good News in the Gospel According to Mark. Mark begins the gospel account with a quote from Isaiah and that John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for forgiveness of sins. John declared that one more powerful than him was coming after him, who would baptize the people with the Holy Spirit. Then Jesus came to John to be baptized, and the Spirit descended upon him, declaring that Jesus was the Beloved Son. Jesus was immediately driven into the wilderness by the Spirit, where he was tempted by Satan, and the angels waited on him. Following his time in the wilderness, Jesus declared that the time was fulfilled, the reign of God had drawn near, and he called upon the people to repent and believe in the Good News. Four fisherman left their boats and followed Jesus when he called them, the first disciples.

Though Mark’s account does not contain the three temptations by the devil (those are in Matthew and Mark’s accounts), Psalm 91:9-12 is the scripture that the devil quotes in both Luke and Matthew while Jesus is in the wilderness, trying to tempt Jesus to throw himself off the pinnacle of the tower to test God. But Jesus knows that God is already with him, and quotes back “do not put the Lord your God to the test.”

We are at the edge of the new year, still in the Christmas season, but looking toward what is to come. Now what? Where will we go? Next week we may hear the call of the magi, or the word from John that the Word became Flesh, but for now, we remember that even our holiest, most joyful story contains pain and sorrow. Even though Jesus came, parents still lost their children because of the wrath of Herod. Even though Jesus came, there is still famine and disease and disaster and hardship. Even though Jesus fled with his parents to Egypt for refuge and safety, millions of refugees around the world do not find safety. Those along our borders are often arrested, caged, and may die of illness and disease. What will we do as we prepare to enter this new world? Can we still sing songs of joy, while struggling alongside others to work for justice in this world? Can we work to end the slaughter of innocents, the struggle of refugees? Can we heal the painful divisions in our nation and community?

May we find the vision of hope, for a new heaven and new earth, and live into the ways that we have been taught, like those who help the least of these. May we still celebrate the good, like shepherds in an occupied land, keeping watch over the flocks during the night shift, who suddenly hear a good word from heavenly messengers in the form of an unexpected newborn baby.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 148)

Praise the Lord! Praise God in the heavens, praise God in the heights;

**Praise the Lord, all the angels and heavenly host!**

Praise God, sun and moon;

**Praise the Lord, all you bright shining stars!**

Praise God, you highest heavens!

**Let them praise God, for God commanded, and they were created.**

All of creation, from the sea to the shore, all rulers and all peoples,

**Young and old, men and women,**

**Let us all Praise the Lord!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of All Seasons, we confess that we fail to change our ways. As we make resolutions that are often focused on ourselves, we fail to transform into the people You need us to be: people who strive for justice over personal gain, compassion and forgiveness over vindication and self-satisfaction. As we prepare for this near year, open our hearts to Your transformation. Grant us the courage to live into Your ways of justice and righteousness. Guide us into Your ways of new life, now and in all times. In the name of Christ, who makes all things new, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God is the Alpha and the Omega, our Beginning and our End. God is making all things new. You are forgiven and loved. You have been given a new heart by God. Go, live into this world by loving one another, pursuing justice, and creating peace. Go and share the Good News that our God makes everything new again. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Refugee and Immigrant, God of the Sanctuary-Seeker: Hear our prayers. As Jesus once fled to Egypt to escape state violence, guide us into the work of justice, to be in solidarity with those around us who are seeking refuge and safety. Fill our hearts with compassion and mercy. As our Savior later taught us that what we do unto the least among us we do unto You, may we see Your face in the face of all. May we tear down the walls that separate, destroy the cages that kill, and instead, build bridges of love. In the name of Jesus, our refugee Savior, we pray. Amen.