Worship Resources for December 31st, 2017—First Sunday of Christmas, New Year’s Eve

Revised Common Lectionary

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

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

Narrative Lectionary: A Voice in the Wilderness, John 1:19-34 (Psalm 32:1-2)

The prophet Isaiah rejoices in what God is doing as the people have returned from exile in Isaiah 61:10-62:3. Righteousness will spring up before all the nations, the Isaiah declares, for all the nations will see what God is doing for the people, and they will be called a new name. All the kings will see the glory of the people, given by God, who has made them like a crown. The prophet will not keep silent, but will tell everyone the good news of what God is doing for Israel.

Psalm 148 calls upon the heavens and all celestial beings and objects to praise God, for God created them and set their boundaries. The psalmist also calls upon the creatures of the deep waters, the creatures of the land, and all the elements of weather—and even the plant life—to praise God. Then the psalmist turns to the people, no matter who they are, their age, or where they come from, no matter how lowly they are or if they sit upon a throne—all are called to praise God, who made them all.

Paul declares that Christ came to redeem all, to make all people children of God, whether they were born under the law, or were Gentiles. In his letter to the Galatians, Paul makes it clear that all may be called children of God, for God has sent the spirit of the Son into the hearts of all believers. All children are heirs of the reign of God.

What happened after the wonderful story we read every year of Jesus’ nativity according to Luke? Unlike Matthew’s gospel account, where Joseph takes Mary and Joseph and flees to Egypt, once Mary’s purification time has ended, they bring Jesus to the temple to be dedicated to God, and they offered the sacrifice required. An old man named Simeon was waiting for them, for he had been promised he would see the Messiah before he died. Simeon blesses the child, but also warns Mary that a sword will pierce her own heart. And the prophet Anna who stayed at the temple also began to praise God and speak about the child to all. And then Mary and Joseph returned to Nazareth with the child, who grew and became strong.

In the selections for the Revised Common Lectionary for New Year’s, we begin with the ancient poem in Ecclesiastes 3:1-13. The Teacher shares that there is a time for everything under heaven, that everything has its season—life and death, war and peace, mourning and joy. It is a gift from God to find joy and pleasure and goodness in this life—for there is nothing better than to enjoy this one life we have from God.

The psalmist ponders what the role of human begins is in Psalm 8. What are human beings that God is mindful of us, and yet, God has made us a little lower than God (some translations read “the angels”). God has given us dominion over the earth the way God has dominion over us.

John of Patmos beholds a vision of a new heaven and a new earth, echoing the prophet Isaiah (65:17). The new holy city descends from heaven, and God makes their home among us. There is no more death or mourning, nothing that divides or separates us from God’s love, for God will live with us.

Jesus’ final parable before his arrest and death is the Judgment of the Nations in Matthew 25:31-46. Those who care for the sick, visit those in prison, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless—all those who do these things, do these for Christ. And those who do this work of God in this world will inherit the reign of God forever. But those who do not do these things do not know God. Those who do not participate in the reign of God now will not understand or recognize it in the time to come.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on John the Baptist as told by the gospel according to John. In John’s gospel account, the religious leaders come to John to see who he is, and he confesses that he is not the Messiah, but he is the one who is to come before him, the voice crying in the wilderness. The leaders do not understand why John is baptizing when he is not the Messiah himself, or one of the prophets that they recognize. John declares he baptizes only with water, and the one they don’t know, the one who stands among them waiting to become known is the one who will be revealed to the people. And the next day, John sees Jesus and declares him to be the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.

The psalmist declares, at the beginning of Psalm 32, that those whose sins are forgiven are happy, have found joy. For the one in whom there is no deceit in their spirit, they will find joy in God.

Everything old is made new again. In the traditions of their people, Mary and Joseph bring Jesus to the temple, and find Simeon and Anna have been waiting their whole life for Jesus. In the ancient tradition of dedication, Mary and Joseph find themselves charged to raise and care for the Messiah of the World. In the people’s return from exile, they find that God is doing something new for them that will effect all nations. Though there are seasons in this life, God still desires for us to hold on to joy and hope, despite the terrible times we may find ourselves in—those seasons will pass. In the end, God has plans for great restoration—a new heaven and a new earth. Until then, we participate now in the reign of God on earth, following the way of Christ our Lord.

Call to Worship (from Galatians 4:4-7)

When the fullness of time had come, God sent the Son,

**Born of a woman, born as one of us.**

In order to save us all,

**So all might be known as children of God.**

Because we are children, God has sent the Spirit of the Son into our hearts,

**So we might cry out, “Abba, Father!”**

For we are children who know God,

**And as children we will live forever in the reign of Christ.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy God, we confess all the broken resolutions of the past year. We confess all the times we tried to do better and failed. We also confess that at times we deliberately broke promises and simply didn’t do what we set out to do. Forgive us of our iniquities. Help us to know that resolutions and promises are short-sighted, but rather to set our hearts on You. Change our hearts, O God. Change our lives, O God, so that we might live for You and for others. Change us, O God, to set our ways on Your ways, so that we might know the fullness of Your life on this day, in this upcoming year, and in all times. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

We mess up and make mistakes. God knows this—God created us, and we’ve been bumbling about ever since. And guess what? God still loves us madly. God loves us so much that God sent us Jesus, to understand our own pain and suffering, to understand the ways we love and hurt one another, and how we try and try and try to do the right thing. You are forgiven. You are loved. Go, and try again. Give it another shot for God and for one another. Amen.

Prayer

As the clock ticks, as the calendar turns, we prepare for the new year, O God. Help us to prepare our lives for You, to live into the newness of these coming days with hope. Help us to continue to actively participate in Your reign now, for we know that You are coming into our lives and into our world in a new way. As we near the end of the time of carol singing, as we near the end of this season of celebration, help us to hold on to this joy all year long. Help us to hold on to the promises of Christ, so that come January, we do not forget the peace and hope that is found in this season, but rather, help us to find it in our own lives, and to share it with others all year long. Amen.