Worship Resources for February 1st, 2015—Fourth Sunday after Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Deuteronomy 18:15-20; Psalm 111; 1 Corinthians 8:1-13; Mark 1:21-28

Narrative Lectionary: Treasure in Heaven, Matthew 6:7-21, 25-34 (Psalm 20:7)

We hear the Call of God in the Hebrew Scriptures during this season after Epiphany; in this passage in Deuteronomy, we hear God’s promise to raise up a prophet for the people. Moses is near death, and the people still need to hear the word of God. But Moses warns that God will hold those who do not listen to God’s words accountable, and God will also hold the prophet’s accountable that do not follow God or God’s ways. There is great responsibility in being the prophet of God, as there is with being the people of God.

Psalm 111 sings praises to God in the company of the congregation. A song sung perhaps as part of worship, the psalmist sings of the glory of God and how God is faithful to the covenant with the people, and provides for them. The psalmist urges those listening to seek the wisdom of God and to practice it in their lives, for the praise of God, and God’s love, endures forever.

1 Corinthians 8:1-13 is a strange passage to us today, but in Paul’s day in Greek cities he visited, if you wanted to eat meat, you went to the local temple of the gods and goddesses, and the priest would sacrifice the animal to that god, and then you could have the meat to eat. Many Gentile Christians became vegetarians in those days or at least refused to eat meat in the temples, so Paul was warning those who were Jewish Christians, or those who did not have an issue with meat sacrificed to idols, to be weary of what their actions may suggest to those who have recently left idol worship. Paul’s argument is that the idols don’t really exist so there is no theological issue with eating the meat, but rather they can become a “stumbling block” to those who do have issues, and to take care that they don’t become a stumbling block by doing something that they find offensive.

Mark 1:21-28 is the first of several stories of Jesus casting out demons, or “unclean” spirits. In Jesus’ day, clean meant one was acceptable in society and in the temple; unclean meant someone was not acceptable. This man has an unclean spirit. We may struggle with understanding what demons are today or spirits, but we do understand that sometimes things are beyond our control or understanding, and whatever was going on for this man, he was considered unclean and was cast out of his community. But the unclean spirit seems to recognize Jesus and says “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth?” Jesus rebukes the spirit to come out of the man. The crowds watching recognize that Jesus has authority, even over the things inside of us that keep us outcast from society.

The Narrative Lectionary contains advice from Jesus for those following him. First he teaches them how to pray—not to use it as a way to boast about one’s religiousness or spirituality, but rather to pray to God in secret, to keep it personal. Jesus teaches them a way to pray (which ironically we do publically in the congregation most Sundays). Jesus tells them not to worry, but rather to trust that God who is the Creator and cares for the birds of the air also cares for them. Don’t be worried about the things of this world, such as possessions, wealth, fame, etc. but work towards the kingdom of God and the things that are worthy of God. Psalm 20:7 echoes this theme—to not be proud of what we have in things, but what we have in God.

Paul’s warning is good for us today—to not become a stumbling block for others. Maybe it’s our old prejudices or habits, but we cannot let our traditions become a stumbling block for others. We need to look at what is keeping others out, and cast out the bad habits from ourselves of wanting only to welcome people like us. In this day, we have couples who are not married who live together, we have vegetarians and vegans, we have step-families and lesbian and gay families and bisexual and transgender people among us. It might be very different than what we are used to and we might even be uncomfortable, but we need to put aside our prejudices and cast out the barriers that would be unclean, that would keep others out, and welcome people in the name of the Christ who welcomes us.

Call to Worship

God is calling us to gather together;

 **In Jesus Christ, we are one.**

God is calling us to join with our neighbors around the world;

 **In Jesus Christ, we are one.**

God is calling us to bring in those who are lost, and those who have been rejected;

 **In Jesus Christ, we are one.**

In Jesus Christ, all of us belong to one another, for we are the body of Christ.

 **Come, let us worship God, and follow Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that we have turned up our noses and have put up walls to keep people out that we don’t want to know. We have rushed by those in need on street corners and rolled our eyes at those who do not fit the social norms we grew up with. Forgive us for our shortcomings, for our refusal to see our neighbors as our brothers and sisters. Forgive us for being stumbling blocks to the message of the Gospel, the Good News of Your love in Christ Jesus our Lord. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases. God is always welcoming us in, and God continues to open our hearts to the newness of God’s love. Share the Good News. Share God’s love by loving others different from you, and know that You are forgiven, for God is creating something new in you. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, may Your Spirit guide us into this new world before us, where the walls of prejudice are tumbling down and the barriers that separate us erasing day by day. Lead us in Your ways of love, justice and mercy. Guide us gently on this journey that we may be open to new experiences, knowing You are with us everywhere we go. Open our hearts to Your love, and to love one another. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.