Worship Resources for February 17th, 2019—Sixth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 17:5-10; Psalm 1; 1 Corinthians 15:12-20; Luke 6:17-26

Narrative Lectionary: Parables of the Kingdom, Matthew 13:24-43 (Psalm 84:1-7)

The prophet Jeremiah speaks on behalf of God in Jeremiah 17:5-10, blessing those who trust in God and cursing those who trust in mere mortals, in humanity. Drawing upon the image of the faithful in Psalm 1, Jeremiah declares that those who trust in God are like trees planted by water, while the wicked will dry and shrivel up like a shrub in the desert. The human heart deceives by going after human desires, but God searches our hearts and minds, looking for the fruit of what we do.

Psalm 1 sings a blessing to those who choose God’s ways, who do not follow the wicked, but instead meditate on the law and word of God. They are like trees planted by the water, whereas the wicked are blown by the wind. God watches over the righteous, who remain in God’s congregation.

We continue our Epistle reading out of the first letter to the Corinthians. Paul wrote to a church in deep conflict, guiding them through their divisions, reminding them of all their spiritual gifts, the need of all parts in the body and that the most important gift is love. Now, he comes to another point in his argument, that some are following the Gnostic teachings that Jesus wasn’t really human, therefore he didn’t really die, but only appeared to die on the cross. Paul says that you can not proclaim Christ as raised from the dead if there is no resurrection. Paul denounces this teaching, for if Christ was not raised from the dead, we do not die to ourselves and our sins. Just as Christ died and was raised, so we must die to the ways of this world and rise with Christ. If faith is only hope in Christ, without death and resurrection, Paul says we ought to be pitied, and those who have died “have perished.” But Paul declares that Christ is raised from the dead.

In Luke’s account, instead of on the mountain, Jesus preaches a great Sermon on the Plain in Luke 6:17-26. While people are being healed of illness, and everyone is trying to reach out to touch him, Jesus begins to teach his disciples. He gives out blessings, as he does in Matthew 5, but in Luke’s account there are also woes. For those who have nothing now, theirs is the kingdom of heaven, but to those who have enough now, it will be taken from them. What appears to be good news is for those in need, but to those who think they are on the inside, that what they’ve received now are blessings—they are the ones who will be on the outside, they will receive woes. Jesus’ words ought to be fair warning for anyone who believes in the prosperity gospel, for the ways of God’s justice are restorative. For those that have, they ought to share what they have with others now (see Zacchaeus in Luke 19 as an example).

The Narrative Lectionary skips ahead in Matthew’s Gospel to the Parables of the Kingdom in Matthew 13:24-43. Jesus begins with the Parable of the Sower, and how weeds were sown by an enemy among the grain. The weeds cannot be removed without uprooting the wheat, so they must remain until harvest time. The second parable is the Mustard Seed, and how it is the smallest (or relatively among the smallest) of seeds, but it becomes the greatest of shrubs. Mustard plants as found in the middle east are often invasive species. No one would go plant a mustard seed (here in the Pacific Northwest, we tell this parable as a blackberry seed. No one goes and plants a blackberry bush!), but God’s reign works like the mustard seed, and becomes a home for the birds of the air, for those who are seeking. Jesus then tells them about the yeast mixed in with flour. Mixing in a little yeast into a lot of flour takes work, but once its in there, it can’t be removed. At the end of this passage (and most scholars believe it was added in later), Jesus explains the Parable of the Sower and the Seeds as an allegory for the day of judgment.

Psalm 84:1-7 sings praise to God for the heavenly temple, where even the birds find a home. Blessed are those who find their strength in God and dwell with God, for their heart knows the way home to God.

There are many paths in this world, ways of truth, justice, and righteousness. While they all may lead people to good lives, we know that staying close to our God brings us peace, and we cannot have peace without justice. It is a blessing to follow the ways of God. It isn’t easy. God’s ways of justice turn our ways upside down. God is searching for those on the margins, those who have fallen through the cracks, and unless we are there with God, God isn’t with us. Unless we die to the ways of the world, we deceive ourselves. We think it’s all right to store up treasures, to confuse our needs with our desires. The ways of the world lead to dead ends. The way of God leads us home, to where we are at peace, to where God’s love dwells with us and we dwell in the heart of God.

Call to Worship

It is good when we come together to worship as the Body of Christ;

 **It is good when we are in the presence of one another.**

It is good when we pray for one another and lift up each other;

 **It is good when we sing and praise God together.**

It is good when we remember those who are unable to be with us,

 **For we know we are together in spirit.**

Come, may we worship God, opening our hearts to the Spirit:

 **It is good when we follow Jesus our Savior together.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Sojourning God, we confess that we have strayed from the path. We’ve followed the ways of the world, searching for success and meaning. We’ve followed the path that is safe for us, where our needs are met, and often our desires, without risking anything. To do so, we’ve often ignored the wounded on the side of the road, the oppressed at the margins of society, the endangered who have fallen in the cracks. Forgive us for being afraid to risk. Forgive us for being afraid to reach beyond our comfort zone. Forgive us for following our own safe way, instead of the Way that You showed us, through Jesus Christ. Call us back to Your path, and may we seek justice, love one another, and walk humbly with You. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Blessed are the poor. Blessed are you who are hungry now. Blessed are you when you are excluded, when people hate you. Blessed are you when you are on the side of justice. Blessed are you when you are in the margins. Blessed are you when you reject worldly measures of success and live into God’s ways of justice, even when it’s hard. Even when it’s painful. Even when you’re not sure you’ll make a difference. Blessed are you. You are forgiven. Now, go, and live into God’s ways of justice and peace. Blessed are you. Amen.

Prayer

Eternal One, present with us in all season and in all times, may Your steadfast love ground and root us. May Your steadfast love encourage us to grow. May Your steadfast love be our protection. May Your steadfast love guide us forward. May Your steadfast love give us strength and courage to face what may come. May Your steadfast love remind us that You are always present. You are always giving us more than we can imagine. You are always with us and within us. Eternal One, may we be renewed in Your spirit and love, grace and peace. Amen.