Worship Resources for February 18, 2018—First Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Genesis 9:8-17; Psalm 25:1-10; 1 Peter 3:18-22; Mark 1:9-15

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus Raises Lazarus, John 11:1-44 (Psalm 104:27-30)

See my Lenten Series “Spring Cleaning Your Spiritual Life,” focusing on the Hebrew Scripture readings.

The Hebrew Scriptures during the season of Lent follow the covenant of God with the people, beginning with the story of Noah and the covenant God made with all living creatures on the earth in the sign of the rainbow. In Genesis 9:8-17, God sets the bow in the clouds as the sign of the covenant. The word used for bow does not refer to a ribbon tied, but rather to a weapon, being set down. God will never again destroy the earth by flood. God will never again aim their weapon at the world. This covenant does not require anything on the part of humanity or the creatures on the earth; this is a covenant God is establishing because God does not want to do this ever again, and the bow is set there so God will remember.

Psalm 25:1-10 is a plea to God for deliverance and protection. The psalmist pleads that their sins not be remembered, but that God would lead them into the paths of righteousness, delivering them from enemies. The psalmist knows that God is good, merciful, and just, and teaches those who are sinners with humility. God is the ultimate guide and teacher, leading in steadfast love and faithfulness to all who are faithful to God’s covenant.

The writer of 1 Peter makes a connection between the flood and baptism in 3:18-22. The writer suggests that God saved Noah and his family through the flood, and that baptism now saves us, not in the washing away of dirt, but as a new beginning, an appeal to God. Baptism is symbolic of a new start, as the flood was a new start—so baptism is dying and rising with Christ.

Mark’s account of Jesus’ baptism and time in the wilderness is brief in detail compared to the other Gospel accounts. In 1:9-15, Jesus is baptized, and immediately driven into the wilderness. There he was tempted by Satan, and was with the wild beasts, and the angels waited on him. We are not given any other details, but after Jesus came out of the wilderness and John was arrested, Jesus took up the same sermon: The kingdom of Heaven has come near; repent, and believe in the Good News. Mark’s sparse details invite imagination and wonder to fill in the gaps. What was it that happened while he was in the wilderness with the wild beasts that gave Jesus the strength to take on John’s message, to go out and proclaim the Good News?

The Narrative Lectionary continues through John’s Gospel account. In the story of Lazarus’ death and resurrection, Jesus delayed visiting, though Lazarus’ sisters Mary and Martha had sent word for him to come. Once Lazarus had died, Jesus then went to visit him, though it was dangerous to be that close to Jerusalem. Mary and Martha had different reactions to Jesus’ visit. Martha is the one who goes out to meet Jesus while Mary stays at home (compare with Luke 10:38-42—Martha is the busy one while Mary waits patiently at Jesus’ feet). Martha confronts Jesus, but declares her faith that she knows her brother will rise again, and when Jesus asks if she believes that he is the resurrection and the life, she says yes, she believes. Mary takes longer to come to Jesus, and she falls at his feet, weeping, and Jesus weeps with her. Even though she says the same words that her sister did—“Lord, if you would have been here, my brother would not have died,” there are no other words that can bring comfort. Mary is also the one, in John’s account, who anoints Jesus’ feet in chapter 12. Both women are moved by faith, but in different ways.

The psalmist, in this great song of creation, reminds the listener that God is the one who gives life and death. In Psalm 104:27-30, God is the one who gives food, who takes away breath, and sends forth the spirit that creates and renews the face of the ground. God is the one who gives life, causes death, and creates again.

How do we have faith when we are tested? Perhaps in Mark’s account, the testing done by the devil is not as bad as the test of going on once John is gone. Of knowing what happened to John, Jesus still goes on to preach a gospel of repentance, of forgiveness of sins, and that the kingdom of heaven is drawing near, even though the earthly king Herod is the one who had John arrested. Perhaps the testing is of believing in a loving God when everything you know has been destroyed, and believing that God doesn’t want this to ever happen again. Or perhaps the testing is like that of Martha and Mary, of having faith when tragedy strikes, and that it’s okay to have the strength of Martha to confront God and still believe, or to be like Mary and completely collapse in grief. God weeps with us, and still gives us strength to go on.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 25:1-5)

To You, O Lord, I lift up my soul;

**O my God, in You I trust.**

Make me to know Your ways, O Lord;

**O my God, teach me Your paths.**

Lead me in Your truth, and teach me,

**For You are the God of my salvation.**

We gather in this time of worship,

**Knowing You, O God, are our Savior, Redeemer, and Teacher. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Teacher God, we confess that we have not followed Your instructions. We have failed to listen to Your teaching; we have failed to follow Your commandments, we have failed to keep the covenants of old. Forgive us for our selfish ways. Instruct us in wisdom and humility. Guide us with love and care. Lead us with courage and strength, knowing that in You we have the hope of resurrection and the promise of new life. In Christ Jesus, our Rabbi and our Friend, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God draws near to us, as one draws near to a friend. Incline your ear and listen to the wisdom our friend God speaks, that you are loved. You are forgiven. You are given a fresh start. Go, live and love and follow the teachings of our wise God. Amen.

Prayer

Designer of our Universe, draw us into wisdom and understanding. You have shared the deep mysteries with us, through Your work in creation, the oracles of the prophets, and the love of Jesus, who laid down his life for us. You have woven us into the fabric of Your creation by making us co-creators with You. Guide us with wisdom and humility into knowing our role, into understanding Your design, and how important our part is. Share with us Your insight and love, so that we might draw others in. Amen.