Worship Resources for February 3rd—Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 1:4-10; Psalm 71:1-6; Luke 4:21-30; 1 Corinthians 13

In the telling of the story of the prophet Jeremiah’s call to ministry as a prophet, we are reminded that this is not an easy call. Prophets are called not to speak what everyone wants to hear, but to tell the truth of the world. Prophets are not always liked, they are often shunned, even imprisoned and abused, as Jeremiah will be. Jeremiah will speak of justice, of remembering the poor, of following God’s wisdom instead of worldly advice. Jeremiah will look and speak out to the well-being of all people, not just the well-being of the politically powerful and the rich. Unlike the view of the rulers, which was looking to what would most benefit them in the here and now, Jeremiah looks to the world, what would benefit all of the people, not just his own. The prophetic view was not popular then, nor is it now, for the worldly view is short-term, temporary, what’s-in-it-for-me mentality. The prophetic view is long-term, what benefits the common good, what looks to the least in the kingdom, and what is God’s desire for all of creation.

Psalm 71:1-6 echo back to the Call of Jeremiah in the understanding that God has known us from the beginning of creation, from before we were born. God is the one who delivers us. God is both creator and midwife, calling us into being and bringing us into life, delivering us out of the darkness. God is our protector and defender, as a loving mother or father, in whom we put our trust.

Luke 4:21-30 gives the second half of the story begun in verse 14 that was part of last week’s readings. Jesus has just read from the scroll of Isaiah in his hometown synagogue, and has told them that the scripture has been fulfilled in their hearing. The people like this, they speak well of him. They like hearing that God is doing good things and that they are a part of those good things. They know that Jesus has been healing and performing miracles and they believe they will be part of this, too. However, Jesus tells them that they won’t, because no prophet is accepted in their hometown. He speaks of the miracles of Elijah and Elisha, who healed those who were outside of their community, even outside of Israel, not even of their own people. And those listening to Jesus get angry. That is not how a prophet or even a Messiah is supposed to act or speak! The prophet is supposed to say “Good job!” The Messiah is supposed to say, “You have been right all along, it’s those other people who are out!” Instead, Jesus tells them that it is the outsiders who will receive him, not them. And just like we learn from Jeremiah, prophecy is a risky business. The people are enraged, drive him out of town and want to throw him off a cliff.

1 Corinthians 13 is a break in Paul’s discourse about spiritual gifts and the diversity of gifts. Probably a song or poem that Paul new or one of his followers inserted, 1 Corinthians 13 is one of the most familiar passages of the Bible, speaking of love. It is often read at weddings, though it is not speaking of romantic love. This kind of love is one that is selfless, uniting, encouraging, and fuels faith. Because we love others, we have faith. Because we love God, we have faith. Faith without love is forced, coerced. Faith with love is genuine. Love is what gives meaning to life. Love gives meaning to our life and faith—and indeed, because the greatest commandment is to love God and love our neighbor as oneself, this is the sum of our faith: Love one another. For we don’t love God if we don’t love our neighbor. If we do not have love, we have nothing, we are nothing.

We are called as people of God to speak of God’s justice to the world, a message that is unpopular. But it is not justice without love. Love is also unpopular. The popular belief is that one can be devoted without emotion. One follows God simply because God is God. One obeys God because God is God. But this is not what we are taught and certainly is not how Christ lived his life. We are called to love one another, and when we love others, we are moved to justice. Justice without love does not have restoration and healing, but only retribution. We must have justice and love. And love does require justice—for justice is restoration. We cannot love our neighbor without being concerned for their well-being, for the poverty and oppression they face. We cannot love them without wanting them to be whole. Love and justice must go together.

Call to Worship (from 1 John 4:7-9)

Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God!

 **Everyone who loves is born of God and knows God.**

Whoever does not love does not know God,

 **For God is love.**

God’s love was revealed to us in this way:

 **God sent his only Son into the world so that we might live through him.**

Come, let us worship our God, who is Love.

 **Let us share in God’s love in our worship.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty Love, we confess that we have misused the name of love. We have called it love when we have turned our backs on the poor, saying they need to help themselves. We have called it love when we have closed our eyes to abuse and neglect. We have called it love when we have justified suffering in the world, promising gifts of eternal life in our words while denying life now. Forgive us for our misuse of Scripture, for our abuse of the word love. Call us to repent, and to seek Your love, a love that knows no bounds, a love that seeks to build up and restore, a love that calls us to act in compassion and justice. In the name of Christ, who is Love, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon (from Romans 8:38-39)

For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen and Amen.

Prayer

God of Steadfast Love, call us into living fully into Your commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves. Call us into living fully into Your way of life by seeking out in care and compassion those who are hurting, those who are struggling, and those who are suffering. Call us into living fully into Your way of faith by shedding our own cares for earthly success and taking on the concerns of the world: to care for the poor and downtrodden, to be good stewards of the earth and all creation, and to be peacemakers. Call us into Your steadfast love. For You so loved the world that You sent us Your Son, Jesus the Christ, so that we might have life in him. Amen.