Worship Resources for February 3rd, 2019—Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

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

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

The selection from the Hebrew Scriptures records the call of Jeremiah as a prophet. He was only a boy when the word of God came to him, telling him that God had appointed him to be a prophet to the nations. Jeremiah says, “I do not know how to speak,” but God tells him that he will go where God sends him, and will speak whatever God tells him to. “Do not be afraid of them, for I am with you,” God tells Jeremiah, and God appointed him to be over nations and kingdoms, to pluck up, to pull down, to destroy and overthrow, but also to build and plant. The prophets always had a word of good news, even if it wasn’t much—there was still good news.

The psalmist calls upon God to deliver and rescue them from the hand of the wicked in Psalm 71:1-6. The psalmist knows that God is the one who brought them into this world, who has known them since birth, and will be their rock and fortress of refuge through difficult times.

This great poem or song of love found in 1 Corinthians 13 is the crux of Paul’s argument to the church in Corinth. In chapter 12, he describes the necessity for diversity in spiritual gifts, and the needs of every part in the body of Christ. In chapter 14, he will continue his discussion on particular spiritual gifts. But here, in 13, he speaks of the greatest gift: love. For without love, no other spiritual gifts matter. Without love, we are nothing. Love is what leads us to understanding, for we cannot understand it all in this lifetime. In the end, no matter what spiritual gifts we have, love is what abides.

We continue with Jesus’ first sermon in his hometown synagogue in Luke 4:21-30. Last week’s reading included Jesus reading from the scroll of Isaiah, sitting down to preach and teach as the rabbis did in his day, and he declared, “Today, the scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” We overlap with that verse, but now we hear how they reacted in his hometown synagogue. At first, they spoke well of him and the gracious words that came from his mouth, and were proud that he was Joseph’s son, someone they knew. But then he tells them that prophets are not accepted in their hometown. He begins to challenge them, knowing they will want proof he is the Messiah, that he’ll want to see signs, and he reminds them of two stories from the Hebrew scriptures of Elijah and Elisha, who helped foreigners instead of their own people. This was not good news for the people of his hometown, and a mob formed, ready to throw him off the cliff. But Jesus was able to pass through them and went on his way. In Luke’s account, he never returns to his hometown.

The Narrative Lectionary continues Jesus’ teachings at the Sermon on the Mount. He begins this selection by talking about prayer. Just before this, in verses 5-6, Jesus warns them not to be like the hypocrites among their own people who stand and pray in the synagogues and street corners so they may be seen by others. In this passage, he begins by saying don’t also be like the Gentiles who pray out loud and heap up empty words and phrases. In other words, prayer should not be a place to draw attention to yourself, but instead, God already knows your needs, so keep it simple: pray for God’s will and kingdom to come, pray for your needs to be met, and pray for forgiveness and deliverance from evil. Jesus goes on to teach about forgiveness, and fasting, and not to store up treasures on earth, for the world’s measures of success will never satisfy. Jesus concludes that section with a harsh saying: you cannot serve God and wealth. Only one can be master to you.

In the second half of this section (optional for this Sunday’s Narrative Lectionary), Jesus continues to speak about how his followers ought to live, and not to worry about the treasures on earth. God provides enough for everyone, for the whole earth and all of creation. If we work for the kingdom of God, when we work for the needs of others, our own needs are met.

Psalm 20:7 simply speaks of pride. Some take pride in what they have, in the weapons and tools they have to keep control, but the people have pride in the name of God. For a people at war, the kings of their enemies have no power over them, for God is with their king.

Speaking truth to power is dangerous, but necessary. In our current time, it seems that so many powers are at work to silence others: white supremacy, toxic masculinity, unimaginable wealth while most of the world is in poverty, cis/hetero normativity—the list goes on and on. When marginalized voices begin to speak up, and a chorus begins to grow—often the ones who are oppressed become seen as the problem that must be squelched, rather than the systems and structures in place that keep the privileged in power. As long as Jesus said words that made others feel good, he was fine, but the minute he challenged them, he was a threat. Jeremiah was only a boy, but was called to speak to nations, and it was frightening because he knew those in power would want to stop him. Even when people think they are coming from a good place, sometimes they use privilege and power they don’t realize they have to speak even louder the voice of oppression. Paul had to speak to angry crowds, and he had to write a letter to a powerful church that was going through problems. He spoke of love as the most excellent way. We as people still misuse love and use it as a way to have power over others. Domestic violence and abuse still run rampant, in our homes and in our churches. But the love that Paul speaks of is subversive. It doesn’t harm others. It rejoices in the truth. And if we can’t speak to another in love, we shouldn’t speak at all. If we are using love to try to keep a false peace, that isn’t love. It’s a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. Love from God endures, and builds up.

Call to Worship

In God we find our rest and refuge;

**We put our hope and trust in God.**

God hears our prayers, God knows our hurts;

**God is faithful, just, and true.**

In times of doubt and disbelief,

**God has given us one another for strength and courage.**

Come, worship God in the presence of one another;

**For God has bound us together in love, as the body of Christ.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Loving-Spirit, we confess that we have put our trust in worldly idols of wealth and power. We confess that we have sought worldly measures of success in fortune and notoriety. We confess that the systems of power in this world have made us complacent with the status quo. We confess that systemic sin is often invisible to us; we do not often recognize the power and privilege we have. Forgive us for not expanding our vision to see what You see: the structures that amplify the voices of the majority and silence the marginalized; the brokenness of the people around us from the structures of disenfranchisement; the pain and suffering of so many in our community. Call us to accountability. Bring us to the path of justice, reconciliation, and healing. Open our hearts, O Loving-Spirit, to repentance, to Your correction, and to Your healing and peace. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Psalm 51:10, 12)

Create in me a clean heart, O God, and put a new and right spirit within me. Restore to me the joy of Your salvation, and sustain in me a willing spirit. Know that God loves you, and has renewed your heart and restored your spirit. You are forgiven. Go, and share God’s love. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Prophets, God of the Artists, God of the Teachers and Singers: help us to use the gifts You have bestowed upon us. Help us to hear Your call, to speak Your words, to sing Your songs, to create as You have created. Help us to teach Your ways, to share in Your joy, to live our lives in a way pleasing to You that uplifts others. May we use our gifts to the best of our ability, to heal, restore, and share Your love with the world. Amen.