Worship Resources for February 5, 2017—Fifth Sunday after the Epiphany

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 58:1-12; Psalm 112:1-10; 1 Corinthians 2:1-16; Matthew 5:13-20

Narrative Lectionary: Raising the Widow’s Son, Luke 7:1-17 (Psalm 119:105-107 or 119:107)

The prophet Isaiah is called by God to call out the people on their stuff, on their rebellious ways, on their doublespeak. As the people have returned from exile, they have gone right back to their old ways. They claim to worship and follow God, they claim to repent of their wrongdoing, but they still do it. Their religious practice is self-serving so they can oppress others. But true practice humbles one’s self before God. It is a fast not from food, but from injustice, oppression, hunger and homelessness. If the people desire to follow God, then they need to break from the ways of the world. God will restore the people, and they will be known as people of restoration, the “repairers of the breach.”

The psalmist praises those who hold God in awe and follow God’s ways in Psalm 112:1-10. The righteous will endure, their descendants numerous. They will remain steadfast and will have no fear. They will also give to the poor and be known for giving freely. Those who are wicked will never be satisfied, and will gnash their teeth in their desire that is not satisfied.

We continue reading in Paul’s letter to the church in Corinth in 1 Corinthians 2:1-16. When Paul first came to the church, he spoke to them plainly about Jesus, and the power of the Spirit was made known. The wisdom that Paul and others speak is not a worldly wisdom; it is a wisdom not understood by the rulers of this age (as in the previous chapter, the world views Christ’s death as foolish, but to them it is the saving power of God). The gifts of the Spirit have been revealed through them, discerned and taught by the Spirit. The rulers of the age did not understand it, but the Spirit has taught the church, and they have the same mind of Christ to understand what God is doing.

The Gospel portion continues to follow the fifth chapter of Matthew. Jesus teaches the disciples that they are the “salt of the earth” and “the light of the world.” They are what gives the world meaning and light, when they shine that light and share that meaning with others. Jesus continues to teach that he did not come to abolish the law, but to fulfill it, and that they must exceed the righteousness of the scribes and Pharisees. Their righteousness must be the consistency in how they live out the law, how the love their neighbors as themselves. They are not to throw away the law and commandments, but rather to live into the fullness of their meaning and to be consistent in how they live them out.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Luke’s Gospel account this spring. In Luke 7:1-17, Jesus not only raises the widow’s son from death, but also heals a slave of a centurion. In this first part of this passage, vs. 1-10, the centurion tells Jesus he doesn’t have to come, but simply say that the slave is healed and the centurion will trust it, just as he trusts his own orders to be carried out. This part of the passage is problematic, because it’s easy for us to read into this that the centurion cared about this slave on a personal level and not simply because the slave was his property. It states that the centurion highly valued this slave, and that the centurion contributed greatly to the Jewish people and had the synagogue built. It’s a dangerous passage, because while slavery was accepted in Jesus’ day, it is easy for us to read into this that the centurion was not involved in the oppression of the people, including his slaves, simply because he was nice.

However, when we read the second portion, vs. 11-17, we are dealing with someone who is oppressed: a widow who has lost her only son. She has lost her only supporter in an economic system that treated women as property. Without a husband or son to help her, she was destined to beg, or become a prostitute. A large crowd has come with her from the town, as if they understand what an injustice this is. And Jesus had compassion for her, telling her not to weep, and Jesus raises him from the dead.

When you look at the first story, when the messengers return to the house, they find the slave in good health. In the second, the people began to proclaim that a great prophet has risen among them. The reaction of the people to someone who brings a liberating healing is what transforms the message into a movement.

Jesus calls us not to throw away what we have been taught, what we have learned, but rather to embrace it and live into it. If the law has become a list of rules, of dos and don’ts, we haven’t embraced the law into our hearts. Jesus later sums up the law and the commandments into “Love God with your whole being, and love your neighbor as yourself.” If we are consistent in following God, we live into the greatest commandment, we are transformed in our own lives, and together we can transform the world.

Call to Worship

You are the salt of the earth;

 **We make the world full of flavor!**

You are the light of the world;

 **We will shine our light for all to see!**

For Christ has come to fulfill the law,

 **And we follow Jesus Christ, whose light shines in us.**

Come, worship God, follow Jesus,

 **And may the Spirit guide us in our daily lives. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty One, we come before You, confessing that we are not consistent in Your ways. We say one thing and do another. We say we love, then act out in hate. We say we care for our neighbors, but then we are silent when racism, sexism, and homophobia persist. Shine Your light in us. Call us back to Your ways. Help us to be consistent in living out Your truth in this world: that You loved us so much, You sent Your Son for us, to lead us into life, to die to ourselves and our selfish ways. Guide us away from self-preservation and instead, hold us to Your call to be last of all and servant of all. For it is in losing ourselves that we gain our lives. For it is in fully loving You that we become all of who You have intended us to be. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God’s steadfast love is always present. God’s peace is always near. Trust, and know that God is with you. Turn back, and find healing, hope, repentance, and restoration, for God loves you madly. Go with the love of Jesus Christ, and share that love with the world. Amen.

Prayer

Ancient of Days, You have taught us from the beginning how to love, how to care, how to serve You. We keep trying to forge our own way through the wilderness, instead of taking the highway You have built. We keep trying to climb the mountain instead of recognizing that You have made the mountains low and brought up the valleys, and are making the rough places a plain. Because we want our own way so badly, we make it difficult for others to follow. Call us back into Your ways of healing, hope, and trust, for You have made a path before us, Your rod and staff continue to guide us through the valley of the shadow, until we reach the green pastures and still waters. Help us to live into Your teachings, Your ways, and to share the road with others. Amen.