Worship Resources for March 10th—Fourth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21

Our Old Testament thread in Lent has been on the covenant between God and the people of Israel. Today’s lesson from Joshua marks another instance of where God fulfills the covenant, even when the people have gone astray. God has made a nation out of the descendants of Abraham and Sarah. God has led them through the wilderness, and now as they enter their new home, God is providing them with the stability of home. No longer will they gather manna, they will be able to grow their own crops. As they celebrate the Passover, remembering what God had done for them in delivering them from slavery in Egypt, the manna ceases, and God’s abundance is revealed in the land around them. While change is inevitable and difficult (how many times did the people complain in the wilderness and want to go back to the oppression they knew?) we know God is with us, and that God will see us through.

Psalm 32 praises God for forgiveness. The psalmist sings about keeping sins secret, hiding what one has done, and finding the damage done by keeping silent and hiding what was wrong was more damaging (spiritually and physically), than confessing the sin or the need for God’s help. The psalmist rejoices that God forgives, God hears, God heals, and God restores. When we think we can do it all ourselves, we are more able to stumble and fail, but when we acknowledge our need for help, we find that God is there with us.

Luke 15 contains three parables, but the parable focused on here is commonly called “The Prodigal Son.” The NRSV subtitles it “The Parable of the Prodigal and His Brother.” However, other Bibles and scholars are calling it “The Parable of the Forgiving Father.” It is not about the actions of the Prodigal son, nor the actions of the Older Brother that are profound or revolutionary; it is the father who runs out to greet his son while he is still coming up the road, the father who drops everything to rejoice when his son comes home, the father who gives everything to celebrate with the son who has been found. All too often we look at this story and think we are mostly like the older brother, judging, feeling that any goodness, kindness or mercy shown to the prodigal is undeserved; or we look at this like the younger, prodigal son, who know we have done wrong and know we need to repent and turn back. But let us look through the eyes of the father—the one who loves all of his children, who gives all he has to the ones who are with him and to the ones who have run off and squandered what they have. The father loves all of his children so much and all that he has is theirs, even if they don’t realize it or appreciate it. The father rejoices when the son that left and squandered and spent and spoiled returns, but the father also includes the ones that never left, the ones that are always there. Are we caught up in sibling rivalry, or do we recognize that God loves us all, each and every one of us, no matter who we are or what we’ve done?

2 Corinthians 5:16-21 reminds us that we can no longer regard each other from a human point of view: we can no longer call ourselves righteous and others sinners. We can no longer say “We have it right and you have it wrong.” We can no longer think we are better than anyone else, because in Christ, everything old has passed away, everything has become new, even ourselves. We are all new creations. We are all the prodigal son and the son who never left. We are the same to God: beloved. Christ became human, one of us, so that we might all become children of God.

Changing our point of view, changing our mindset, changing our way of thinking is difficult. It’s hard for us to change our view about someone who has wronged us, who has sought our forgiveness and is living a new life. It is hard to change our mind about other people. It is also hard to change the mind of the church, the old viewpoint: the world has changed around us. We can no longer view people as church and unchurched. We can no longer see people as insiders and outsiders. Rather, we are all called to “unchurch.” We are all called to let go of our lens that excludes and divides others but see all as children of God. We must go out of the doors to the people. We must let go of the manna and instead go out to see what crops are to be harvested. It is a hard change, but one we are called to move through, one we must go through, for everything old has passed away, and everything is becoming new.

Call to Worship (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—

 **Nothing will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord**

There is nothing we can do, no place we can hide, where God will forget us

 **God loves us, God forgives us, God calls us by name.**

 **Let us worship our God who seeks us, finds us, and loves us! Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Parental God, we have failed to see each other as Your children. We claim to see each other as brothers and sisters, but we put others down and we puff ourselves up. We think we are more worthy than others, and we judge how others believe and live. Forgive us for not seeing through Your eyes, for not serving through Your hands, for not walking together with Your feet. Call us away from the view of the world, and instead look to You, and see the beautiful prism of life reflected in Your light. In the name of Christ, who came into this world to become our brother, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Whoever does the will of God is our brother and sister, our mother and father. God has called us away from the earthly divisions and bonds into a greater community of faith. May we live as forgiven and loved people, and see all others in the same forgiveness and love. Amen.

Prayer

Almighty God, who led our ancestors in faith out of the wilderness into a land that became their home, You continue to walk with us in our journeys of life. Guide us in the ways that we interact and relate to one another. Help us to pause and take notice of our neighbors, to concern ourselves with their daily needs, to care for them in distress, to comfort in times of brokenness. Call us to live in faithfulness to Your ways in our daily lives, and call us to live in the ways of compassion and mercy, love and forgiveness in this world. Remind us that it is not our duty to gain followers, but our call to love and serve others. Help us to minister to one another in this world. In the name of Jesus, who taught in the synagogues and ministered to thousands outside, and continues to call us to move beyond our comfort zone, we pray. Amen.