Worship Resources for March 10th, 2019—First Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Deuteronomy 26:1-11; Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16; Romans 10:8b-13; Luke 4:1-13

Narrative Lectionary: Forgiveness, Matthew 18:15-35 (Psalm 32:1-2)

We begin this first Sunday of Lent in the Hebrew Scriptures with the practice of giving the first fruits of harvest. In Deuteronomy 26:1-11, the practice of celebrating the spring harvest was a way of giving thanks to God for leading the people into the promised land, but also a reminder that once they did not have a home. Once they were enslaved in Egypt, now they were given a land of their own, and they gave back to God as a reminder of what God had given them.

The psalmist writes in Psalm 91:1-2, 9-16 that God is their refuge, in whom they trust. Because the people have made God their refuge, no evil shall befall them. God will answer those who call out, and God will protect and deliver them. Even angels shall be with them and guard them from harm.

In Paul’s letter to the Romans, Paul speaks of the word of faith we proclaim, in 10:8b-13. Our words of faith match what is in our heart, what we believe—it does not matter our background. Speaking to a primarily Jewish congregation in Rome, a community he had not met yet, Paul wants to make clear his theology, that what saves is not one’s traditions or heritage, but their word of faith and belief of their heart.

Luke’s account of Jesus’ time in the wilderness includes the same three temptations listed in Matthew’s account, but in a different order. They both begin with the same temptation, of Jesus being hungry after fasting and the devil tempting him to command stones to turn into bread, but in Luke’s account the devil shows Jesus all the kingdoms of the world second. Lastly, the devil takes Jesus to Jerusalem and the pinnacle of the temple, and even quotes scripture back at Jesus from Psalm 91. “If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here.” If God is real, God will save you. For Luke, this is the greatest temptation, the one that foils the devil, because Jesus will not test God. Jesus, fully human and fully divine, faces his humanity in this moment, that he doesn’t have to prove God exists.

The Narrative Lectionary follows Jesus’ teachings on forgiveness in Matthew 18:15-35. Jesus is teaching the disciples the importance of mediating conflict, of trying to reconcile, but also shows that it doesn’t always work. This should not be taken as prescriptive for all conflicts, especially when abuse is involved, but many concerns between people who hold one another in mutual regard and respect can be resolved through dialogue. When Peter asks how often he should forgive, Jesus tells him forgiveness isn’t something completed by quick words, but it is a process. Jesus tells a parable about a slave who could not pay his debt, and the king forgave him—but then the slave then went after someone who owed him money. When that man couldn’t pay, the slave had him thrown in jail—but the other slaves reported him to the king, and the king in his anger had him handed over to be tortured. We cannot hold the sins of someone against us when we continue to sin in that same manner.

The psalmist begins their song in Psalm 32 with a declaration of blessing: happy are those whose sins are forgiven. Happy are those that God finds without deceit—for those who do not hide their sins before God.

We begin Lent with the familiar story of Jesus facing temptation in the wilderness. While we may perceive this experience of Jesus in spiritual terms, being tempted to perform a magic trick, whisked away to see the kingdoms of the world, and then placed at the pinnacle of the temple, these are very human temptations Jesus faces. Jesus was fully human and fully divine, and in his humanness, he may have questioned where was God while he was facing all of this. While he was famished in the wilderness. Where was God when his people were oppressed by the Romans? Where was God when he needed his basic needs met? But Jesus does not test God, does not demand God prove they exist. Instead, Jesus faces his own temptations, and the devil leaves him. For the Narrative Lectionary, there is a temptation to make reconciliation and forgiveness either too simple or too complicated. Either we think we have to forgive quickly without thought, or we do not forgive at all. Instead, we must wrestle with both the human and divine elements of forgiveness—that we still sin, and are still need of forgiveness, and yet, we also want to protect ourselves from harm. It seems from both Jesus’ direct teaching and the parable he shares that the clearest understanding of forgiveness is we must forgive others for doing the same things we still do.

Call to Worship

We enter this season of Lent, knowing the wilderness is ahead;

 **Prepare us, O God, to face whatever adversity may come.**

We enter this week, uncertain of the distractions that might arrive;

 **Help us, O God, to keep our minds on You.**

We enter this day, hoping to set our hearts on Christ;

 **Keep us, O God, to the way of faith.**

We enter this time of worship, dependent upon our God;

 **Show us, O God, Your way, Your truth, and Your life. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Faithful One, we confess that we give up too easily. We throw our hands in the air and turn away. We confess that we almost always take the easy way out and we struggle with the difficult questions of faith. Keep us to Your way, O God. Keep challenging us to do justice, love mercy, and be humble with You. Hold us to the covenant You have made with us, to be our God, and for us to be Your people. Guide us on this journey of faith, through the valleys of shadow, beyond our doubts and fears. Remind us that You are close to our hearts, always. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

May the peace of Christ be with you. May the hope of God be with you. May the joy of the Spirit be with you. May the love of God abide with you forever. May you know God’s forgiveness and mercy, and may you share these gifts with the world. Amen.

Prayer

Gracious God, we know we are not always so graceful. We stumble over each other. We barely can see beyond the log in our own eye but are quick to jab at the splinters in others. We fumble with forgiveness and blunder our apologies. Gracious God, help us to be more graceful: with each other and with ourselves, and to extend Your wonderful grace to the world. Amen.