Worship Resources for March 11, 2018—Fourth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Numbers 21:4-9; Psalm 107: 1-3, 17-22; Ephesians 2:1-10; John 3:14-21

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus and Pilate, John 18:28-40 (Psalm 145:10-13)

The people are grumbling against Moses and God in Numbers 21:4-9. They complain they have no food—they do, but they just are tired of the manna. The poisonous serpents perhaps remind us of the serpent in the garden of Eden, the serpent that tricks and tempts. However, the people recognize the error of their ways, and asked Moses to pray for them. When those who were bitten raised their eyes up—away from the grumbling and complaining in front of them—and saw the serpent Moses had set on a pole, they lived. If only they would rise above and see what was all around them, instead of what is right in front of them—they would understand what God had done for them.

The selections from Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 speak of a time (like the time of the people in the Exodus, as shared in the above passage) when the people are sick with sin—complaining and grumbling about what God had given them. But in their crying out to God, God saved them. God heard their cries and delivered them.

The letter to the church in Ephesus may or may not have been written by Paul, and most likely was not written specifically to that church (the name is only mentioned in the beginning), but was perhaps the world’s earliest chain letter, sent off to a number of churches with only the name changed. The letter is sent as an encouragement to the early believers, to remind them that it is through Christ Jesus they have been saved, and this is not their own doing, it is a gift from God. Even though they have now been raised up by grace, God’s intention from the beginning was good, creating them for good works to be their purpose, their way of life.

In Jesus’ conversation with Nicodemus, in this section of John 3:14-21, Jesus eludes to the story where Moses lifted up the serpent in the wilderness. So, too, must the Son of Man be lifted up. So, too, must we lift our eyes from the world that we have known and understand that there is more to the world than what we see. Those who lifted their eyes and saw the serpent lived; those who lift up their gaze and recognize Jesus as the one who saves them will be saved. For God so loved the world that he sent us Jesus—not to condemn the world, but to save the world. But some choose not to do good—those that choose evil, who do not choose the light, condemn themselves by their actions. But those who choose God will be exposed by the light, and it will be seen that it was God at work in them.

The Narrative Lectionary continues following Jesus’ last day. Jesus is before Pilate in John 18:28-40, but only because the religious leaders who wanted to condemn Jesus wanted him executed, and they could not do this during the Passover, so they hand him over to the Roman authority. When Pilate questions Jesus about being a king, Jesus declares that his kingdom is not of this world. Pilate does not understand who Jesus is, but in John’s account finds no case against him. But when given the choice to release him, Pilate allows the crowds to choose, and they choose Barabbas, who John’s account describes as a bandit (Luke’s account describes Barabbas as an insurrectionist, rising up against Rome).

The psalmist sings in these verses of Psalm 145:10-13 that God’s kingdom is an everlasting kingdom, whose dominion endures throughout all generations. All the works of God will give thanks to God, and all the faithful will bless God, and speak to the glory of God’s kingdom. God is faithful and gracious, in all God says and does.

We can choose to keep our view focused on what we know, on what is right in front of us. We can choose to be bitter and angry and never satisfied. We can choose to ignore the gifts of God and only complain about our situation. Note that this is different than the cries of injustice, for God hears the cries of injustice. When the system oppresses the people, God takes notice, as God took notice of the Hebrew people when they were enslaved. But it is when the people are in a place of privilege and complain and grumble about their situation—this is when God gets angry. This is when the poison of sin infiltrates our lives, and we begin to gossip and slander and become known as complainers. This is when those of us who have privilege and power are ignoring the cries of the oppressed around us because we’re stumbling over ourselves. This is when we need to lift up our gaze and see the world. We need to lift up our gaze to God, and know that we will live, and that in Christ we have new life, eternal life. And this is when we need to get to work and listen to the cries of the oppressed around us. For the kingdom, or beloved community of Christ, is one that endures forever. It is not found at our feet, but found when we lift up our gaze and see those around us as part of the beloved family of God.

Call to Worship (From Ephesians 2:4-5, 8-10)

God, who is rich in mercy, out of great love saved us from our trespasses;

**God made us alive together in Christ.**

By grace we have been saved through faith;

**This is not our own doing; this is the gift of God.**

For we are what God has made us,

**Created in Christ Jesus for good works.**

It is not the result of what we do, but the result of God’s grace that we do good,

**For God set this to be our way of life.**

Come, worship God, be filled with the Spirit,

**And follow Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we confess to You that our thoughts are not often on the sacred, on the holy, but on the things that trip us up. We compare ourselves to those with wealth and power and we desire what others have. We hold high standards for those in need, that they should be able to get by on so little, when we have so much. We spend our energy in countless ways on things that do not matter eternally while ignoring the plight of those around us. Forgive us. Call us into Your ways of Your Eternal Beloved Community, to love one another, to lift up one another, to care for each other’s needs as if they were our own. Lift up our gaze from the temporary so we may seek the eternal around us. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God’s steadfast love endures forever. Our shortsightedness is short-lived. God is the one who lifts our gaze to the eternal. Let go of the temporary, and hold fast to God’s eternal love. Know that you are forgiven, loved, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

Spinner of the Universe, You have created a delicate web of life, connecting us all to one another, to creation, to the very atoms that help birth stars. You continue to add new threads, new patterns, new ways of weaving us together. Help us to understand our connection, to seek it rather than divide away from it. Remind us that we are part of one another, part of creation, part of all You have made. Great Creator, help us to be part of Your design for the universe and for each other by practicing loving-kindness, mercy, and peace. Amen.