Worship Resources for March 12, 2017—Second Sunday in Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Genesis 12:1-4a; Psalm 121; Romans 4:1-5, 13-17; John 3:1-17 or Matthew 17:1-9

Narrative Lectionary: Lament Over Jerusalem, Luke 13:1-9, 31-35 (Psalm 122 or 122:6)

In these three-and-a-half verses from Genesis 12, we hear God’s call to Abram to leave the land of his father and to set out to a land that God will show him. God has promised to make a great nation out of Abram, and that all families of the earth shall be blessed through him.

Psalm 121 (a personal favorite) sings of where one looks for hope and help. When the psalmist lifts their eyes to the mountains, it is not the mountains that bring hope, but the maker of the mountains. God is the one who keeps us from evil, protects us, watches over us, and is with us in the beginning and the end, our coming and our going, now and forever.

This passage from Romans 4:1-5, 13-17, looks at the life of Abraham and his righteousness. Abraham lived before the time of the law, and yet was faithful to God because he walked with God, because he lived into God’s ways. Paul writes that Abraham was not justified by his works—if Abraham was only noticed by God because he did the right thing, he could lord it over others, but instead, Abraham lived rightly because he was already faithful to God and God’s ways. Paul argues it is the righteousness of faith that justifies, not the works of law that save us. When we are faithful to God, we will do the right thing and the right way fulfills the law. The law is impossible to keep true to without faith in God, therefore it is faith that leads to righteousness, in Paul’s argument.

John 3:1-17 is Jesus’ encounter with Nicodemus, a Pharisee who believed that Jesus had been sent by God. Nicodemus also mentions that there are others who also believe Jesus to be a rabbi sent by God. Yet Nicodemus does not understand when Jesus mentions being born from above, being born of water and of Spirit. Jesus refers to the story of Moses and the people as they were being bitten by snakes. Just as they had to lift their vision up to see beyond the snakes biting them, so the people of Jesus’ day needed to lift their gaze from the problems they were hoping to avoid and instead look to what brings life. Jesus then declares that the son was sent into the world because God so loved the world, so that all who believe may have eternal life, and that God did not send the Son to condemn the world but to save the world.

Matthew 17:1-9 is the story of the Transfiguration, which was in the lectionary two weeks prior. This is the reflection I wrote for February 26th:

Jesus takes Peter, James and John up the mountain, and suddenly his face is transfigured and his clothes become dazzling white. We don’t know what it means to have a face transfigured, only that Jesus’ face shown like the sun. It was something amazing and terrifying at the same time. And suddenly Moses and Elijah are with Jesus, talking to him. Peter, the one who always had to have the right answer first, decides to interrupt the three and say, “Lord, it is good for us to be here…” and then goes on to talk about making dwellings for each of them, as if Moses and Elijah are also anointed ones, kings sent by God. While Peter is talking, a bright cloud overshadows them and says, “This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased—listen to him!” Similar words were spoken at Jesus’ baptism as the spirit descended. The disciples all fall down with fear, but Jesus tells them to get up, to not be afraid, and to not tell anyone about the vision until he rose from the dead. Peter was still looking at Jesus as a prophet, or as a worldly king, and wanted to be first to show the world that this was the new king. Instead, God kind of tells him to shut up and listen.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Jesus’ lament over Jerusalem in Luke 13. The chapter begins with a strange discourse, in which we have lost the context, but Jesus uses two incidents—one involving Pilate murdering Galileans, another involving an accident with a tower collapse—to show that God did not cause these things to happen, and that these things were not the result of individual sin. However, Jesus does tell those listening that unless they repent, they will meet the same fate: death.

Jesus then tells the parable of the fig tree (in Matthew and Mark, Jesus curses the fig tree), and the fig tree is given one last chance to produce fruit, otherwise it will be cut down, when the gardener intercedes on its behalf.

In verses 31-35, some Pharisees come and warn Jesus that Herod wants to kill him. Jesus retorts back that prophets are only killed in Jerusalem, not outside, and that he must continue his work. Jesus laments that Jerusalem, the holy city, is the same place where the prophets are not listened to. Jesus longs to gather the people together as a mother hen gathers her chicks, but he knows it is futile. History will repeat itself.

In both the Revised Common Lectionary and the Narrative Lectionary, we are given examples of Pharisees that don’t fit the stereotypes that Christians have often had of Pharisees, that we have read into our texts. Like Nicodemus, we sometimes make false assumptions and stick to old worldviews that do not make sense. We judge others and continue old prejudices, rather than being open to God, who is constantly making all things new.

Call to Worship (from John 3:16-17)

For God so loved the world,

 **That God gave the Only Son,**

So that everyone who believes in him will not perish,

 **But have eternal life.**

Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world,

 **But in order that the world might be saved through him.**

May we join our hearts in worship this morning,

 **Following the One who came not to condemn, but to save. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Creator God, we come before You confessing that we have judged others. We stereotype; we label; we place people into categories of good or bad. We stick to prejudices that have been passed down to us without questioning them. We ridicule some and ignore others. Forgive us for our refusal to see our neighbor as ourselves. Forgive us for our lack of understanding of who are siblings are in the world. Forgive us for our ignorance. Call us into accountability, to make amends, and to do the right thing. In the name of Christ, we know we have hope that we might be transformed. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Forgiveness is free. Grace is given. Restoration is received. Learn from your mistakes, do what you can to restore and heal, and serve God by seeking justice and peace in this world. Go, share the Good News, and love one another. Amen.

Prayer

Great God, You have made us in Your image. You have planted Your love in our hearts. You have sent us into the world to share Your love with the unloved, Your hope with the hopeless, Your peace with the restless. We have forgotten our calling. Help us to listen, to turn back and follow You, and to love others with the love You have given us. Help us to be living hope to those who feel despair. Help us to be peacemakers by working for justice in a broken, unjust world. May we embody Your image in the fullness of Your love, grace, and peace to all we encounter. In the name of Christ, who embodies Your image more fully than we can ever imagine, we pray. Amen