Worship Resources for March 15th, 2015—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: Bridesmaids (or Talents), Matthew 25:1-13 or 14-20 (Psalm 43:3-4)

We have been following the theme of God’s covenant with the people through Genesis and Exodus during Lent. Today’s passage from Numbers isn’t about a covenant per se, but more about God’s fulfillment of the previous covenants. Even though the people have been quarreling and complaining in the wilderness and God has been angry with them, God still desires to save them, and gives a way for them to be saved—Moses fashions a bronze serpent and puts it up on a pole, and anyone who looks up at the serpent will live rather than die from the poisonous snakes on the ground. This image reminds the people that looking down they can see the problems in front of them, but by looking up they remember the covenant of God with Moses and with their ancestors long ago.

Psalm 107:1-3, 17-22 is a reminder of a time when the people turned away from God. The psalmist sings of the people being sick from their sinful ways, but then God saved the people when they cried out. God’s love is steadfast, and the people are called to remember God is always faithful, even when they are not.

Ephesians 2:1-10 states that we are God’s creation, that God had made us and our intention is for good works, which God designed beforehand to be our way of life. God has saved us through grace, and not by our own doing. Even though we have strayed and sinned and fallen into the ways of this world, God reminds us of our intention in our creation, which was that we were created for good works.

John 3:14-21 contains the famous verse of John 3:16, but with some context. Prior to verse 14, we learn that Nicodemus, a Pharisee who supports Jesus, has come to him at night, and Jesus explains to him that we must me born from above. God so loved the world that God sent his only Son, so that everyone who believes may not perish but have eternal life—and God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world. Just as the people had to lift up their eyes to see beyond their troubles in the wilderness, so we must look to Christ and his example and see beyond ourselves. In the light, all of who we are will be exposed, and if we say we believe, our actions must show our beliefs.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Parable of the Bridesmaids or the Parable of the Talents. Both are part of Jesus’ final discourse before his betrayal, arrest, and crucifixion. Both are parables about the kingdom, or reign of God, and what we are doing to prepare. Are we like the foolish bridesmaids or the wise ones, who are ready for the bridegroom even if he is delayed? Note that even the wise ones fell asleep while waiting. Matthew’s account shows us that in the generations following Jesus’ death, the believers needed assurance that Jesus would come, even if it was not in their lifetime. The Parable of the Talents also shows us what we ought to be doing in preparation for Christ’s reign—not holding back, but boldly stepping out in faith.

Psalm 43 is a psalm about waiting for God, and the psalmist sings out for God to vindicate them, to send out God’s light and truth. The psalmist feels cast off and abandoned by God, but knows that God will be faithful.

We are midway through Lent, on our journey to Easter Sunday and celebrating the Resurrection, but we know that we can go astray. We can see only sometimes what is in front of us, the struggles we are facing right now, and it can be hard to perceive God’s faithfulness in the messiness of everyday life. But God remains faithful, even when we are not. And God’s love is steadfast, even when we are waiting a long, long time.

Call to Worship (from Ephesians 2:8-10)

We are what God has made us,

**Prepared in Christ Jesus for Good Works.**

This is not our own doing,

**Grace is the gift of God.**

Come, join in this time of worship:

**May we prepare for the good work God has given us;**

**May we prepare to follow Jesus.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Ancient One, we confess that we are short-sighted. Sometimes the problems right in front of us take over our world. Sometimes we only look to doing good deeds for the day, and forget the structures and systems of oppression and sin that affect others all the time. Forgive us for only perceiving what affects us, and move us towards compassion for our neighbors, especially those on the margins of society. In the name of Christ, who lived among the margins, and casts a vision into eternity for us, we pray all things. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

There is newness in God every moment, for God’s steadfast love endures forever. There is forgiveness found in God in every moment, for God’s forgiveness endures forever. There is hope found in God in every moment, for our hope in God endures forever. Go and share this Good News. Amen.

Prayer

God of love, You have loved us, You have loved the world, so much that You sent Your Only Son to us. You sent Christ to us not to condemn the world but to save the world. You sent Christ to us so we might walk in the light, so we might be whole. You sent Christ to us to show us the Way of life that leads to eternal life. Call us away from the ways of the world that call for quick fixes, for short attention spans, and instead call us into Your vision of hope for eternity. We lift our eyes up to You for all things, to see beyond ourselves, and to know that You are the Author of Salvation, the Hope of the Morning, and in You, all things are new, all things are possible. Amen.