Worship Resources for March 18, 2018—Fifth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 31:31-34; Psalm 51:1-12 or Psalm 119:9-16; Hebrews 5:5-10; John 12:20-33

Narrative Lectionary: Jesus Condemned, John 19:1-16a (Psalm 146)

The prophet Jeremiah speaks of a new covenant in 31:31-34. The former covenant was broken by the people as they forsake God and followed other gods, made alliances with other nations that put Israel in jeopardy, and forgot the poor, the widows and orphans among them. The new covenant cannot be broken, because God is writing it in their hearts. They will know that they are God’s people, that their God knows them. God will forgive them of their sins, remembering it no more—because this covenant is unbreakable, set in their heart by God the Creator.

The psalmist confesses to God that they have sinned in Psalm 51:1-12. Often attributed to David, the psalmist desires to be right before God and seeks reconciliation with God. The singer wants to be made clean, to know that things have been made right and that they can start again, for the wrongdoing they have committed is weighing on them. They know that they must be restored by God in order to be free from the anguish they have experienced from their sin.

In this section of Psalm 119:9-16, the psalmist seeks God’s ways so that they will not sin. By learning the ordinances, statues, and precepts, they know the wisdom of God and will not stray from God’s way.

Hebrews 5:5-10 declares that Jesus is now our high priest. Referencing Melchizedek, a priest mentioned in Genesis 14:18 who brings out bread and wine to Abraham, and in Psalm 110, often attributed to David, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews sees Jesus as in this line of priests, that stretches back before Moses, and that Jesus is not only the high priest but also the sacrifice, ending the system of priestly sacrifice. Jesus becomes the source of eternal salvation, the priest who intercedes on behalf of us forever.

This passage in John, from 12:20-33, indicates that outsiders wanted to know who Jesus was, not just the Jews he visited, but now some Greeks who also wish to meet him. Jesus declares this is the time for the Son of Man to be glorified, and that it is time for the seed that fell to earth to die to bear fruit. This is the moment that God is doing something new—God is branching beyond the boundaries the people have known, including the boundary of death, to bring new life, to become the new covenant in people’s hearts. Jesus declares that when he rises, he will draw all people to him—Jew and Gentile, male and female—all.

The Narrative Lectionary continues the account of Jesus’ final moments. In John 19:1-16a, Jesus is handed over by Pilate to be crucified. Though Jesus declared his kingdom was not of this world, the soldiers call him King of the Jews, dressing him in a purple robe and weaving a crown of thorns for his head. Though Pilate declares there is no case against Jesus, Pilate still hands him over, calling him “their king.” Even in this moment, Jesus tells Pilate that any power he has comes from God, that the true king of creation is God. However, the crowds shout out that they have no king but Caesar.

Psalm 146 declares that the people should not put their trust in worldly rulers, in human beings. Their plans are temporary and will fail and die, but God’s ways are forever. God is the one who sets the prisoners free, grants justice, watches over the strangers and the vulnerable. God is the true king who provides for all and reigns forever.

Sometimes as Christians we seem to think that the new covenant was a concept that came with Jesus, but God established a new covenant long ago. For Christians, we believe the covenant is carried on and lived out in Jesus. However, the prophets knew long ago that the people were treating the ordinances and statutes like a list of rules, rather than a way of life, a way that the psalmists sang about, about the word being very near, on their lips and on their heart. The prophet Jeremiah said the new covenant would be written on our hearts, and so Jesus declares the same. God’s love is known to us because God made us, and put God’s love in our hearts. As Christians, we know this fully in Christ Jesus, but this covenant has long been known among our Jewish siblings in a different, yet similar, way.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 119:10-15)

With our whole heart, we seek God;

**May God guard us against straying from the commandments.**

With our whole heart, we treasure the word of God;

**May God keep us from sin and harm.**

Blessed is our God who teaches us;

**May our own words reflect what God has taught us.**

May we meditate on God’s precepts, and fix our vision on God’s ways;

**May we delight in God’s statutes, and never forget the word of God.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Loving God, we confess that we have ignored Your love for us. We have been swayed by the temptations of the world for power and wealth, swayed by the desire to fill our hearts with worldly possessions and measures of success. Forgive us for not desiring Your love, a love that fills and sustains. Forgive us for ignoring Your love, a love that is unconditional, forgiving, and restorative. Forgive us for forgetting Your love, a love that sacrifices itself for us, a love that requires nothing in return. Call us back into Your ways of love, and through Your love, may we find wholeness, peace, and forgiveness. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

O give thanks to the Lord, for God is good; God’s steadfast love endures forever. There is nothing we can do that will separate us from God’s love. There is no place where we can go where we will be lost to God. God is actively searching for you and will find you. God already forgives you, because God has loved you from the moment you came into being. Know that you are forgiven and loved. Now, go: live into God’s ways of love, mercy, and forgiveness. Amen.

Prayer

Maker of the Stars, You have also made us out of the same stardust. You have breathed life into our bones and You grant us new life beyond what we perceive. Grant us wisdom. Grant us insight. Guide our steps so that we tread carefully upon the earth—the only planet You have given us—and open our minds to fathom the incredible, endless universe You have made. Breathe into us again, O God, the Spirit of Life. Nurture us on this journey, so we may be open to new understandings, even if they shake the foundations of what we have known before. Strengthen and soften our hearts, so we may be open to love those we find despicable and disgraceful, and that we, too, may know the love of those who have once hated us. Peel away the shell that holds us back, so we can see the newness of life that flows from You, that lives in our very skin, that is made of the dust of creation, for You continue to breathe new life in us. May the scales fall from our eyes, and may we perceive in our hearts Your love that expands throughout the universe. Amen.