Worship Resources for March 22nd, 2020—Fourth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: 1 Samuel 16:1-13; Psalm 23; Ephesians 5:8-14; John 9:1-41

Narrative Lectionary: Greatest Commandment, Mark 12:28-44 (Psalm 89:1-4)

The prophet Samuel is distressed with the prospect of having to anoint a new king in 1 Samuel 16:1-13. God is ready to move on, but Samuel is afraid that Saul will kill him. But God tells Samuel to go under the guise of offering a sacrifice and meet Jesse, the father of eight sons who lived in Bethlehem. God did not choose the oldest or the strongest, but God chose the son that Jesse didn’t bring forward—the youngest who was out tending the sheep. God told Samuel that this young boy was the one to be anointed king. And Samuel anointed David as king in the presence of his brothers.

Psalm 23 has long been attributed to David, though scholars are uncertain who wrote it. This is an ancient song of comfort and assurance of God’s presence. God is the one who leads us like a shepherd leads the sheep—caring for our needs and giving us rest. In the midst of the darkest valley, we know that God the Shepherd is with us, protecting us, and guiding us. God prepares a table in the presence of our enemies, and showers us with abundant love—the anointing of our head, the cup overflowing. The psalmist concludes with a blessing of goodness, mercy, and assurance of God’s presence in our lives.

The writer of Ephesians urges their fellow Christians to live as children of the light in 5:8-14. We are called to be witnesses of Christ in all we do, so our works ought to reflect the light that is within. Light exposes everything, making the truth of who we are visible. The writer concludes this passage calling forth the ones asleep to wake up. Paul often used the image of being asleep as a way of describing those who paid lip service to the faith but did not align their lives with Christ, for those who are awake are living in the fullness of Christ.

John 9:1-41 is a long story of Jesus healing a man who was born blind. Jesus’ disciples ask a question of who sinned—this man, or his parents. There was an old belief among many cultures that disability and illness were caused by sin. Jesus debunks this clearly. However, Jesus also states that this man was born blind “so that God’s works might be revealed in him.” We must remember the context of Jesus’ day, while holding our 21st century understanding of ableism, as Jesus heals this man. One of the interesting things is that this man, when he returns to his community, is known as the man who used to sit and beg. In Jesus’ day, if you were disabled, you couldn’t work, and you were often forced to beg. This man is no longer forced to beg. He is now restored to society. Healing is not the same as curing. Healing is restoration. And when the man is asked how his eyes were opened, he tells everyone that this man Jesus told him to wash his eyes, and now he could see. While the religious leaders demanded to know how this happened, and if Jesus was a sinner, all the man knew was now he could see, and now he no longer had to beg. Those questioning him were missing the point, trying to determine if Jesus was lawful or not, a sinner or not—they could not see the good he had done for this man. Jesus compares the religious leaders narrow view as a spiritual blindness, that they cannot see because of their sin; whereas the man born blind did not sin but now can see and no longer has to beg, because of his belief in Jesus. This is a difficult passage to preach on and must be handled with care.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Greatest Commandment in Mark 12:28-44. These verses contain the content of Jesus’ teaching in the temple, during the days before his betrayal and arrest. The way rabbis learned from each other was by debating with each other. When a scribe hears Jesus answering the questions of others well, he asks him which commandment is the greatest. Jesus responds with the Shema, the call to prayer from Deuteronomy 6:4, that everyone present would have known by heart. He also quotes Leviticus 19:18 about loving one’s neighbor as one’s self, which other rabbis of Jesus’ day also linked together. The scribe responds that Jesus is correct, and the scribe offers his own thoughts on living into these commandments, that they mean more than the burnt offerings and sacrifices. Jesus responds that he isn’t far from the kingdom of God. Jesus then asks those gathered around him about the Messiah and David’s son, quoting Psalm 110, and warns against those scribes that wanted to be looked upon for their position rather than the work they did. Lastly, Jesus observes a poor widow putting all she had into the temple treasury, and teaches his disciples that the sacrifice she has made is greater than all of the rich who give out of their abundance.

Psalm 89:1-4 begins with praising God as the one who chose David as king and made the covenant with David. The psalmist declares that God’s steadfast love endures forever, as David’s reign and descendants will endure forever.

Focusing on healing, we know this is not the same as curing. Healing is about restoration. In the midst of a world turning upside down because of COVID-19, we are praying for a vaccine, for a cure for this deadly pandemic. However, this pandemic is exposing the systems of our world are broken, and a vaccine won’t cure them. We need healing for our healthcare system where insurance is not affordable for the most vulnerable. We need healing for our education system that must bear the burden of providing food for low-income families and disability services for those age 3-21. We need healing for our workforce for whom many do not have paid time off, and healing for a broken system of childcare, care for the elderly among us, and for those experiencing homelessness. If we truly live into the commandments that Jesus declared were the greatest, in loving God with our whole being, we must love and care for our neighbors as we care for ourselves. How can we do this better in this time of crisis?

Call to Worship (from Psalm 113:1-4; 9b)

Praise the Lord! Praise, O servants of the Lord,

**Praise the name of the Lord!**

Blessed be the name of the Lord

**From this time on and forevermore.**

From the rising of the sun to its setting,

**The name of the Lord is to be praised.**

The Lord is high above all nations,

**And God’s glory is above the heavens.**

**Praise the Lord!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Great Physician, we come to You now, praying for the healing of our nations. We pray that we might come together in this crisis. We confess our broken systems of healthcare, education, and labor. We confess that we do not love our neighbors as ourselves when they do not have adequate healthcare coverage. We confess that we do not love our neighbors as ourselves when schools have to scramble to provide lunches and services for families in need. We confess that we do not love our neighbors as ourselves when workers have no paid time off, no sick leave, and will lose their jobs if they do not work. Call us into accountability, so that we might do the work of healing, which is reparation. Call us into Your commandments, to serve our neighbors in need in the best ways that we can. Great Physician, bring healing to us, and guide our healthcare workers and protect them. Grant wisdom and guidance to our doctors and researchers working on a vaccine. Nonetheless, we are the ones called into the hard work healing, and we pray for Your wisdom to be with us. In the name of Christ, who is the hope of resurrection and restoration, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God is our Good Shepherd, who restores our soul, who leads us in the path of righteousness. Though we are in the valley of the shadow, we will fear no evil. We know that God is with us, and that God has prepared a table before us. Surely goodness and mercy will be with us all our days. Go with this good news of God’s love and forgiveness, for we shall dwell with God forever. Amen.

Prayer

Creator of us all, whether we are from China or Italy or the United States, we are one people, made in Your image, and we are in need of healing. Bind us together, Great Creator, reminding us that we are from the same stardust. Call us into the work of love for one another. Help us to denounce racism, to call out prejudice when we perceive it, and to work for justice. We are all Your children. Help us to view one another as siblings, bound together in love. In the name of Christ, in whom we all have the name children of the living God, we pray. Amen.