Worship Resources for March 24—Third Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63:1-8; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

Narrative Lectionary: Wedding Banquet, Matthew 22:1-14 (Psalm 45:6-7)

The Hebrew Scriptures during Lent point to hope for a future. The prophet Isaiah, in 55:1-9 speaks to the people coming out of exile, that God has something greater in store for them, if they’d only perceive it. If they’d only leave behind worldly ways, worldly measures of success, they would find satisfaction in God’s ways. The prophet questions why they work for food that doesn’t satisfy, and instead, they should listen to God’s word and ways, and find the rich food. God desires to make an everlasting covenant with the people, and to lead them to a higher way of life.

The psalmist sings of how their soul longs for God in Psalm 63:1-8. Invoking the image of the desert in need of water, so the singer longs for God with their whole being. The writer of this psalm was a strong poet, speaking of the depth of their desire for God. God’s steadfast love is better than life. The singer blesses and praises God, and finds comfort in the shadow of God’s wings.

In Paul’s first letter (that we have) to the church in Corinth, in 10:1-13 he compares them to the people of Israel in the desert with Moses. He uses the image of baptism to refer to the people escaping from slavery into freedom through the Red Sea, and by God’s appearance to them in the cloud. Paul interprets the water from the rock as the rock of Christ, the living water. However, Paul is using these stories as a metaphor, stories that the church in Corinth would be familiar with, rather than reinterpreting the stories. The Christians in Corinth must be careful not to go astray, for as the people in the wilderness went astray, so some in the church have followed the ways of other peoples around them. He warns them not to become idolaters, and not to put Christ to the test. God does not test us so we might fail; rather, we are not alone in the struggles we go through. This passage has been misinterpreted to say that God won’t give us anything we can’t handle. That’s not what Paul is stating; rather, we are called not to be proud, but to understand that life is a struggle, but God is with us in the struggle and in our suffering.

In Luke 13:1-9, Jesus hears that Pilate ordered the death of some Galilean pilgrims who were sacrificing at the temple. However, the way Jesus speaks about it, it’s clear that some in the crowd thought it was a sign that God was displeased with this group of Galileans. They were interpreting this as a sign of God’s judgment. Jesus instead tells them that they didn’t suffer because they were worse sinners, but rather that suffering is not God’s judgment. However, unless we turn back to God, we will all suffer death. Unless we repent, death is the final judgment on us all, no matter who we are. Jesus then tells a parable of a fig tree, similar to accounts of Jesus cursing the fig tree in Matthew and Mark, but in this case, the gardener saves the fig tree for a short time from destruction. This fig tree hasn’t produced fruit for three years, but the gardener pleads to give it a chance to be nurtured for another year. But if it doesn’t bear fruit after that, then it can be cut down.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Parable of the Wedding Banquet as recorded in Matthew’s account. Jesus tells a story of a king who holds a wedding banquet, but none of the invited guests come. They make light of it, or they mistreat the king’s messengers and slaves, even killing them. So instead, the king sends his slaves out to invite everyone on the main streets in. They find people, both good and bad, and fill the banquet hall. But when the king arrived for the feast, he noticed one was there without a wedding robe—a garment that would have been given him to wear if he didn’t have his own. He doesn’t know what to say, but the king has him thrown out, saying “many are called, but few are chosen.” The parable shows God’s generosity, that the kingdom is for all people, but sometimes those invited take it for granted, and those who are welcomed don’t always honor the invitation. Transformation is required for all who choose to accept the welcome.

The psalmist conjures up the image of the royal throne room in Psalm 45:6-7 as the psalmist praises their earthly king. God loves righteousness and hates wickedness, and God has anointed the new king with the oil of gladness.

God is inviting us to a new way of life, a higher way, a way of wisdom and insight. God is calling us to repent and turn back to God, to turn away from the ways of the world, for they lead to death. The way of the world is to compare sins, to think “at least we’re not as bad as *those* people.” However, we will all end up with the same fate, no matter who we are. The ways of worldly success lead to dead ends. The ways of worldly pleasures lead to emptiness. The ways of the world simply lead to the grave. But the way of God leads to life, to God’s steadfast love that endures forever, and death has no hold. Choose the life God desires for you, and you will be satisfied. Choose the transformation God offers you, and you will find life eternal.

Call to Worship

Everyone who thirsts for righteousness,

 **Come to the waters of life!**

Everyone who is hungry for justice,

 **Come and be fed by the Spirit!**

God has made with us an everlasting covenant,

 **God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

Come, worship God, who leads us into life;

 **Come, follow Jesus, who is the Way, the Truth, and the Life.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God who Made us and Longs for us, we confess that our own desires have led us astray. We have consumed more than we need and have found ourselves wanting. We see only what we lack, instead of all the blessings we have. We mistake blessings as possessions and wealth, rather than understanding the blessing of Your love, grace, justice, mercy, and peace in our lives. Forgive us for our misguided ways. Forgive us for our wrong definitions. Call us into the path of gentle correction, that we may strive to live out Your ways of love and justice, to mold our desires to be what You desire for the world, so we might love one another and become the Beloved Community on earth as it is in heaven. In the name of Jesus we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God is our help, our strength, our refuge. The psalms declare we rest under the shadow and shelter of God’s wings. There is nothing you can do that will take you away from God. There is no place you can go where God will not find you. You each are God’s beloved child. Repent; turn back to God, and living into God’s ways, knowing you are forgiven, loved, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

God Most High, help us to take the higher way. Help us to leave behind the paths of this world—the paths of worldly success, the paths of petty revenge, the paths of looking out for ourselves and our own. Instead, help us to embrace the high road. Though it is difficult, help us to work for justice in our seeking of peace. Though it is long, help us to seek reparations when we seek reconciliation. Remind us that we do not sojourn alone. God Most High, You called a wandering Aramean as our ancestor in faith; You called a wandering people to become Your people; You called a wandering preacher in Galilee Your Son, and You have called us again to be Your children. Help us to seek Your ways, for they are higher than our ways. Amen.