Worship Resources for March 26, 2017—Fourth Sunday in Lent

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

Narrative Lectionary: Rich Man and Lazarus, Luke 16:19-31 (Psalm 41:1-3 or vs. 1)

Samuel anoints David as king in 1 Samuel 16. God has rejected the choice of Saul as king, as he has not followed God’s ways, but the new choice for king is one that Samuel did not expect. In order to avoid suspicion, he came to Bethlehem under the ruse of offering a sacrifice and invited Jesse and his sons to come. Samuel was told the new king would be among Jesse’s sons, but it is not the oldest and strongest, but the youngest, the one away with the sheep instead of with their father.

This ancient song of comfort, Psalm 23, is often attributed to David. This song is a reminder of God’s steadfast love and presence during times of comfort and times of distress. God is the one who cares for us like a shepherd cares for their sheep, and will lead us to green pastures. God is the one who blesses us and restores us even in front of those who hate us, and we can rest assured knowing God is with us.

Ephesians 5:8-14 reminds us to live as children of light. We should not hide who we are, nor should we put on a false front. If we belong to God, then we will live into God’s ways. The fruits of our work will be known because they are honest and true. Paul stresses that the works of darkness must be exposed—the falsehoods, the dishonesty, the shameful acts that others do in secret. Instead, find out what is pleasing to God and live that way.

A man who was born blind is healed in John 9:1-41. This is a passage that must be read and interpreted with caution. Healing is not the same as curing. Healing involves wholeness. In this case, this is a man who had to beg because in that time and culture he could not work. Jesus breaks down the stigma and shame surrounding disability in his day by declaring that no one sinned. Jesus was not the first to do this—the prophets began to take apart the idea that God punished future generations for the sins of their ancestors. Jesus continues in the prophet’s tradition by dismantling the idea that disability was caused by sin. Jesus’ work of healing isn’t about curing, but about restoring people who have been left out of society.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus. Jesus tells a story of a rich man who ignored Lazarus, who begged from his gate, and the dogs of the rich man would lick the sores of Lazarus. Flipping the social norms, Lazarus is the one whose name we know, and Lazarus is the one who rests with Abraham while the rich man, who goes unnamed, is tormented in hell. Jesus, like the prophets before him, links how we treat those who in need with how faithful we are. If we care for those who are poor and homeless, we are doing the work of God. If we ignore those who are poor and homeless, we may find ourselves left out and ignored in the kingdom of God. And although the rich man asks Lazarus to go back and tell his brothers to warn them, Abraham said they had the prophets, and if they won’t listen to the prophets, they won’t listen to one who rises from the dead.

The work of Jesus is to bring healing, to bring wholeness, to welcome in those who have been outcast in society. But some of the religious leaders of his day were much more concerned about who was right and wrong. They weren’t going to listen to Jesus or see his healing as miracles; instead, they were concerned about rules and rule-breaking. Jesus followed the commandments of God, but was clearly a rule-breaker when it came to social norms and the interpretation of the commandments as a checklist of rules. Following a checklist keeps others out; living out the commandments invites others in.

Call to Worship (from Ephesians 5:8-10,14)

You are called to be children of light;

**May we live as children of light**

For the fruit of light is found in all that is good and right and true;

**May we live in ways pleasing to God.**

Everything that becomes visible is light,

**Sleeper awake! Rise from the dead, and let Christ’s light shine on you!**

Come, join in this time of worship

**Follow the light. Live into the light. Be the light of Christ in the world.**

Prayer of Confession

Holy God, we confess that at times we have watered down the faith to be a list of rules. We have judged others and decided who is worthy of being in and kept others out. Forgive us for our sins. Forgive us for not seeing Your way as a way of life. Forgive us for not looking inward, to judge ourselves and to live our lives in ways pleasing to You. May we follow Your light, and turn away from our selfish ways. In the name of Christ, the Light of the World, we pray, Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

The light shines in the darkness and the darkness did not overcome it. The rod and staff of the Great Shepherd bring us comfort in the valley of the shadow. God is with you. God is leading the way. Follow God, and know you are forgiven, loved, and restored. The banquet table is set for you—come, accept the invitation, and join the feast. Amen.

Prayer

Shepherding God, keep us close to You. Help us not to stray to the dangerous cliffs. Help us not to follow the easy path that may lead to ravenous wolves. Help us not to stumble among the rocks. Keep us close, and lead us to green pastures and still waters. Restore us when we feel faint. Carry us when our burdens are heavy. Hold us close to Your heart, and lead us through the valley of the shadow. We know You are with us. Help us to draw others into Your fold, knowing that You are the Shepherd of All. In the name of Christ, the Good Shepherd who lays down his life for his sheep, we pray. Amen.