Worship Resources for March 29th—Fifth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Ezekiel 37:1-14; Psalm 130; Romans 8:6-11; John 11:1-45

Narrative Lectionary: End of the Age, Mark 13:1-8, 24-37 (Psalm 102:12-17)

Resources for worship during a COVID-19 outbreak can be found here.

*In light of the COVID-19 outbreak, I am changing the way I usually create resources and making unison or single leader readings, rather than responsive readings. Even if you use Zoom or other video conferencing, the timing may not always be correct for responsive readings. Feel free to adapt/change as needed. For unison readings, I suggest muting everyone so they read out loud at home.*

The prophet Ezekiel finds a message of hope from God out of a valley of death in Ezekiel 37:1-14. After the exile into Babylon, the prophet is called by God to prophesy to the dry bones, probably an old battlefield. God asks a rhetorical question: can these bones live? Can a nation that has been scattered, sent into exile, with a dried up spirit become alive again? God will make a way. God will call upon the wind, and calls Ezekiel to prophesy to the breath. Breath, wind, and Spirit are the same word in Hebrew, *ruach*. God will bring back what has been lost, what is considered dead. God will restore the people.

Psalm 130 is a prayer for help to God. The psalmist calls upon God to hear them, knowing that in God there is forgiveness. The song speaks of the soul waiting for God, as one waits for the morning during a long night vigil. The psalmist concludes with a call for the people to place their hope and trust in God, the one who will redeem them, the one in whom there is steadfast love.

Paul writes to the church in Rome to focus on the spirit in Romans 8:6-11. If they set their minds on the spirit instead of the flesh, they set their minds on what is eternal. The flesh refers to what is temporary, what leads us away from eternity. But a life centered on the Spirit gives new life, new values, and God will give spiritual, eternal life to mortal bodies by the Spirit that dwells in us.

In John’s account of Jesus’ life and ministry, Mary and Martha had a brother Lazarus and lived in Bethany in John 11:1-45. When Lazarus became ill, his sisters sent word to Jesus, but he delayed arriving until after Lazarus had died. The disciples urged him not to go, because the religious leaders were looking for a reason to kill him, but when Jesus insisted on going, Thomas encouraged them all to go, to die with him. When they arrived, Martha confronted Jesus outside, stating that if he had been there, her brother wouldn’t have died. However, Jesus told her he would rise again, and Martha declared she believed in the resurrection and in the Messiah. Nonetheless, when Jesus arrived and finally spoke to Mary, she knelt at his feet, saying what her sister said: if he had been there, her brother wouldn’t have died. Jesus broke down, weeping. He went to the tomb, in front of all those who had come to mourn, and called Lazarus out of the grave.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the End of the Age from Mark 13:1-8, 24-37. While Jesus taught in the temple during his last days, he spoke about how the temple would eventually be destroyed, and warned there would be wars and destruction. However, they ought not to be alarmed, for those events did not mean the end. However, after those things, Jesus declared that the Son of Man would return, and this age will pass. Jesus states that only God the Creator knows, but he urged the disciples to keep awake.

Psalm 102:12-17 sings of God’s enduring reign, and how God will restore Zion. God will rise up, restoring what was destroyed, and all nations will turn to God.

Thinking of these passages in the midst of a COVID-19 outbreak, it seems that we are in an exile from the normalcy we knew. Everything has changed in a matter of weeks, or days. How do we find hope for return? We turn to the Scriptures, to Ezekiel, to Paul, to Jesus, and know that what is happening right now, what we are experiencing, is only temporary. The Spirit is eternal. While we wait in exile, we find signs of hope. Neighbors are checking in on each other. Communities are working together to provide lunches for schoolchildren. People are sharing resources to provide for artists and others going without pay, and government officials are taking action (though we hope for greater action). We see the signs of hope for us now, and know that we put our trust in God. We pray for those in the labs working on a vaccine and those who have volunteered to help. We pray for doctors and nurses who are on the front lines, caring for those who are sick. We do our part to help flatten the curve by staying home, and maintaining physical distance while reaching out to our friends, family, and neighbors in other ways, and trust that God will see us through.

Unison Call to Worship (Psalm 105:1-4)

**O give thanks to the Lord, call on God’s name,**

**Make known God’s deeds among the peoples.**

**Sing to God, sing praises to the Lord,**

**Tell of all God’s wonderful works.**

**Glory in God’s holy name,**

**Let the hearts of those who seek the Lord rejoice.**

**Seek the strength of our God,**

**And seek God’s presence continually.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Creator God, You created the world out of chaos, and we confess that our world right now is in chaos. It is difficult for us right now to make sense out of what is happening. Illness and death have interrupted our lives. The world human beings created has turned upside down. But You are our constant, O God. You are our compass, O Christ. You are the wind that moves us, O Spirit. Guide us in this time, where we confess we need You more than ever, to be our foundation, to guide our way, and to move us into compassion and love. In the name of Christ, who journeys with us now and always, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Lamentations 3:22-25)

The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; God’s mercies never come to an end. They are new every morning; great is God’s faithfulness. My soul speaks: “The Lord is my portion, therefore, I will hope in God.” The Lord is good to those who wait, to the soul that seeks God. In this time of waiting, may we know God’s presence and faithfulness endure forever. May our soul speak for us, in putting our hope and trust in God. We are forgiven, loved, and restored. Amen.

Prayer

Prince of Peace, we pray right now for peace in our hearts. We pray that we may take advantage of the world slowing down as a reminder that the sabbath was created for us, a time of rest. May we lay aside the longing of the world we created to be busy, to do all the things possible. May we lay aside the guilt that we are not doing enough for our work, for our families, for our children or for our elders in this time. May we instead embrace this new pace, and find peace. May we keep ourselves from others to reduce harm, to share our love by our actions of self-isolating to prevent the spread of disease.

Prince of Peace, our fears our real. We fear loss of income and jobs. We fear for our own health and safety, and the health and safety of loved ones. We fear what the future may bring. Help us to let go of fear as a force that holds us back, but help us to acknowledge our fear, to sit with it as with a troubled friend. Help us to give ourselves compassion and grace as You once showed Martha and Mary when their brother Lazarus died. Help us to hold on to the hope of resurrection in this life, a new life that may emerge from the circumstances we face now. Guide us into Your ways of peace, for all our hearts. Amen.