Worship Resources for March 31, 2019—Fourth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Joshua 5:9-12; Psalm 32; 2 Corinthians 5:16-21; Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32

Narrative Lectionary: Bridesmaids (or Talents), Matthew 25:1-13 (14-30), (Psalm 43:3-4)

The selection from the Hebrew Scriptures continues to point toward hope in this season of Lent. In Joshua 5:9-12, the Israelites have completed their journey out of Egypt and the wilderness. God has taken away their shame, and the manna that God provided during their time in the wilderness came to an end, on the day they ate the produce from the land promised to their ancestors.

The psalmist repents, turns back to God and confesses their sin in Psalm 32. A song of thanksgiving, the psalmist announces their forgiveness by God, declaring how God is their refuge, in hope others will also repent and turn back to God. Healing is found when one confesses. Trust and obey the teaching of God, the psalmist declares, and don’t be like animals that need to be led by bit and bridle, but be led by God and rejoice in God’s steadfast love.

In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, 5:16-21, he writes that everything has been made new in Christ. We are reconciled to God through Christ, and therefore ambassadors of reconciliation, called to share that message with others, to become reconciled to God. Paul speaks to the church in Corinth, a deeply divided church of members who followed different Christian teachings and leaders, to become reconciled to God and to one another.

Jesus tells the parable of the Prodigal Son, or Forgiving Father, in Luke 15:1-3, 11b-32. There are two other parables told in the verses missing from this selection. Jesus was teaching, and the tax collectors and sinners were coming near to listen to him. Sinners would have been a broad group that might have included people who were ritually unclean, beggars, lepers, sex workers, and others. Some of the religious leaders thought Jesus was being hypocritical. Jesus tells three parables—one about a lost sheep, one about a lost coin, and then this one: a son who demands his inheritance before his father has died, goes off and spends it all, and becomes destitute. He recognizes that if he goes home, he isn’t worthy, but it’s better to go home in shame than to have nothing. But as he returns, his father rushes out and greets him, accepting him publicly. The older brother, however, is upset, because he has never been given the same celebration his disgraceful younger brother has. But his father replied, “you are always with me; all that is mine is yours.” The father insists they had to celebrate because the son who was lost is now found.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Parable of the Bridesmaids, with an optional inclusion of the Parable of the Talents as told by Matthew. These are among Jesus’ final teachings to the disciples. In the Parable of the Bridesmaids, five only brought enough oil for the time they expected the groom to come, but five others had brought extra oil for their lamps and were ready when the groom was delayed. The five who had only brought what they expected had to leave to find more, and they missed the groom. When they arrived, the groom didn’t recognize them and didn’t allow them in. Jesus warns his disciples to “keep awake.”

In the Parable of the Talents, Jesus tells a story of a man who goes away and entrusts his money (talents) to his slaves. To one he gave five, to a second, he gave two, and to a third, he gave one talent. When he returned, he found that the one he gave five to had made five more, and the same with the one he gave two to, he had two more. But the one he gave only one talent, that slave had buried it in the ground, and gave it back to his master. The one who only had one was called wicked and lazy, and his talent was given to the one who had ten talents. “For those who have, more will be given; for those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.” This is a harsh parable, but it is not about investing money, but rather that if we are not willing to risk what we have, we are bound to lose it.

The psalmist sings for God’s light and truth to lead them on in Psalm 43:3-4. The psalmist will worship God at the altar of joy and will praise God.

Parables are short stories with a moral point, but they also are stories with layers. Every time we go back to a parable, we discover a new layer, a new understanding that wasn’t there before. As always, it is helpful to look at the context of where Jesus was in his ministry and teaching. He’d been hanging around tax collectors and other sinners, and that wasn’t the crowd a respected teacher should be with. But by sharing the parable of the Prodigal Son/Forgiving Father, he both recognizes the feelings of those who feel disrespected while validating that God rejoices when we welcome those who have been excluded. In the Narrative Lectionary’s parable selections, Jesus was in Jerusalem, about to be arrested. He wants the disciples to be prepared for what is about to happen, but also to understand the long-term ramifications: they will have to watch and wait for signs of his return. In the same manner, they must be willing to risk. If they hide away what they’ve been given by Christ, they will not serve him, but if they are willing to risk themselves for the Gospel, they will experience God’s abundance.

Call to Worship (from 2 Corinthians 5:7, 14-16)

We walk by faith, not by sight;

 **For the love of Christ urges us on.**

If we are in Christ,

 **We are a new creation**

Everything old has passed away;

**Everything has become new!**

Come, enter this time of worship:

 **May we be renewed in our spirit, through Jesus Christ our Lord.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that at times, even when we do our best, we fail. We are not perfect. We sometimes do not recognize when our words or actions, even when we mean well, can cause harm. We miss signs and cues from others. Call us into accountability and show us mercy. Instill in our hearts kindness and compassion, for others and ourselves. Teach us how to forgive well, in ways that protect ourselves from further harm, but extend the same mercy You have extended to us. Forgive us when we have failed to notice the harm we have caused, and help us to correct our faults and make amends as best as we are able. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

It is a blessing that we are not perfect. It is a blessing that we make mistakes. It is a blessing that we have opportunities to grow and learn. God created us to change! May we offer forgiveness and give space for one another to learn and grow. For God has shown us abundant mercy, grace, forgiveness, and healing. Go into the world, to restore and repair, to heal and forgive. Amen.

Prayer

Author of Life, inspire in us to write a new page, a new chapter on healing and forgiveness. Inspire us to leave the tropes of the world behind by ceasing violence, and instead seek ways of reparation and restoration. Sing into our hearts the songs of praise and thanksgiving. Write into our bodies the actions of love and justice. Plot in us the course to follow the way of Christ in all we say, do, think, feel, and believe. Create in us a new, whole story, of love and life everlasting. Amen.