Worship Resources for April 28—Fifth Sunday of Easter

Normally I would have had these resources out early, but Earth Day crept up on me. In light of the bombings in Boston and now the tragedy unfolding in West, Texas, I am moving commemoration of Earth Day to April 28th. It also seems to fit the lectionary well with the Revelation passage (21:1-6). However, it may be appropriate to take some of the resources from this day to use on April 21st for your congregation.

Also, I have written a Prayer for Boston in the aftermath of the bombings. Feel free to use, and to adapt, as the tragedy in West, Texas emerges, we have many to pray for in this time.

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 11:1-18; Psalm 148; John 13:31-35; Revelation 21:1-6

As we read the passages about the early church in Acts throughout the Easter season, we are reminded of Peter’s own struggle of who to include in the sharing of the Gospel. In the four Gospels, there are a few references to non-Jews, but most of Jesus’ ministry was to his own people. It is clear that Jesus was working to reform his own people and his own faith tradition, but the movement was starting to spill over. Peter and others wrestled with this. If Jesus truly was from God and was fully human, then it couldn’t be an exclusive message. Besides, the teachings of Jesus—love and compassion—certainly could not be kept inside one group of people, one tradition. The Way, as it was first called, was life-transforming. It was beyond a people, a culture or a single faith tradition. Peter recognizes that the walls of discrimination, even covered with the veil of tradition and religious belief, have to come down in the face of Jesus as the Risen Savior. Jesus lived and died for all, and lives again. The gifts of God are truly for the people of God.

Psalm 148 is a song of praise for God’s work in creation, and calls upon creation to respond in praise. We are reminded that the relationship of God with creation is not just us (humanity) and God, but between us, God, and creation. We are called to join with creation in praising God, not ignoring or defiling creation. This psalm reminds us that God is the one who has created all, and that all of creation participates in the worship and celebration of God.

John 13:31-35 is a familiar passage to many of us. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus is asked a question about which is the greatest commandment, and Jesus replies with both the Shema from Deuteronomy 6:4 (Hear, O Israel: the Lord our God, the Lord is One: You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your strength, and with all your mind), and adds a second: “and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.” But in John’s Gospel, the Shema isn’t there. Instead, Jesus says that he is giving them a new commandment. This takes place just after he has warned them that he will be betrayed, just after we are informed that Judas is the one who will betray him—Jesus tells them they must love one another. If we have love for one another, everyone will know that we are Jesus’ disciples. Even the ones who betray us and hurt us, we are called to love. Even the ones who deny us (the passage goes on to foretell Peter’s denial). We are called to love.

Revelation 21:1-6 tells of the new heaven and new earth—a passage of hope and restoration, where God’s home is among all living beings. We usually think of heaven as somewhere else, but Revelation shows us that God’s intention is for heaven to be among us. God’s intention is for God’s home to be among us. The walls of separation of this life from the next, of earth and heaven, of life and death—will be gone. God’s intention is for us to dwell together. God’s intention for all of us is to dwell in creation together (Genesis). Reflecting back upon Psalm 148, this is part of the design of creation from the beginning—that we would be in relationship with God and with each other. We are called not only to reconcile with each other and with God, but we need to reconcile with creation. We have misunderstood our role of having dominion and subduing the earth—we have done so for our own use, not for God’s. Revelation speaks that the ways of this world, the separations of earth and heaven, of humanity and God, of our ways verses God’s intentions, will be gone. God’s intention will come to fruition, and the boundaries will pass away. We live for this vision.

God’s intention is to break down the dividing walls, the separations, between us and God, between us and each other, between us and creation. Jesus came to erase the boundaries, and gave us a new commandment to love one another. This commandment reframes the old: no longer are they to be about exclusion, but inclusion. No longer are people to separate themselves for God, but to come together and love one another for God. Even death will no longer divide and separate us. God’s intentions are for us to dwell together with God, as it was in the beginning. God’s desire is not destruction, but restoration. God is making all things new, and desires for us to participate in the breaking down of walls and the building up of the kingdom, or community, of God.

Call to Worship (from Genesis 1:1 and Revelation 21:1

In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth

 **Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth,**

**for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away**

The earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep

 **And I saw the holy city, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven**

Then God said, “Let there be light,” and there was light, and God saw that it was good.

 **And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying,**

 **“See, the home of God is among mortals.”**

We worship now on this earth created by God, created in goodness.

 **We await our home with God, where death and mourning will be no more.**

 **Come, let us worship our Creator God, who makes all things new!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Life, call us away from the temptations that keep us from truly living. Call us away from short-sighted decisions and selfish gains. Call us into Your vision in which we see Your intention for all of creation, the intention of abundant life. May we enter into the hope and promise of new life by living into Your ways of compassion, justice, and love. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Surely God who has given us life grants us the promise of new life now. We have the opportunity to start afresh, to turn back to God, to seek forgiveness and walk in humility with God. You are loved. You are forgiven. You are restored. Amen.

Prayer

Crafting God, You have molded us out of the earth, as You molded the earth out of stardust. You have traced the rivers in the world as You have traced the paths of comets and the lines in our skin. Create in us a new heart, one that is inclined towards Your intentions of life, and love for one another. Stir in us a desire to care for all of creation, including our brothers and sisters in humanity, and remind us that all things have been created by You. Help us to recognize the everyday sacredness around us. In the name of Jesus, who leads us into life, we pray. Amen.