Worship Resources for April 30, 2017—Third Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 2:14a, 36-41; Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19; 1 Peter 1:17-23; Luke 24:13-35

Narrative Lectionary: Stephen’s Witness, Acts 6:1-7:2a, 44-60 (Luke 23:33-34a, 46)

We continue Peter’s speech in Acts 2, repeating the first part of the fourteenth verse, and continuing on with verses 36-41. Peter declares that the Messiah that he believes David foretold about is Jesus who was crucified—or as he addresses the crowd, “whom you crucified.” Peter makes it personal, and the crowd is horrified. What can they do? Peter tells them that they ought to repent and be baptized, so that their sins will be forgiven and that they may receive the Holy Spirit. Peter states that the promise is for all of them—for those near and far away (those in diaspora who could not make the pilgrimage of Pentecost) and around three thousand were baptized that day.

Psalm 116:1-4, 12-19 sings of God’s faithfulness. God has answered the prayers of the psalmist, and in turn, the psalmist pledges to worship God and to fulfill their vows in the presence of the people—to make a public declaration. Even if the psalmist has to die, the sacrifice is worth it for God, for in God the psalmist has found freedom. In the courts of the temple, in the presence of all, the psalmist will worship God and show their devotion.

The letter of 1 Peter continues this week, with Peter declaring that they have been ransomed, not by any works they or their ancestors could do, but by the precious blood of Jesus through his sacrifice. Because of his sacrifice, they can trust God, who remains faithful, and they have been born anew. Because they have been born anew, they are called to love on another “deeply from the heart.” This love is genuine and it is mutual, and it is true because God’s love is in them.

We continue reading of the appearance of Jesus to the disciples in this passage about the Road to Emmaus (this was the reading for the Narrative Lectionary last week). Jesus appears to two previously unknown disciples on the road to Emmaus, one of whom is named Cleopas. They encounter a stranger on the road to Emmaus. They do not understand what has happened, and have dismissed the women disciples of Jesus who have claimed to have found the tomb empty and have seen angels. Jesus declares to the two disciples on the road that they are foolish, and explains the Scriptures to them, from the time of Moses and the prophets, about the Messiah, but they still do not understand until they persuade him to stay with them and he breaks bread with them. In the breaking of the bread, they recognize him, and he vanishes from their sight.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the early witness of the church and Stephen’s martyrdom in Acts 6-7. The early church was beginning to get into trouble as they appointed new apostles who went out to share the good news of Jesus among the Jewish communities. In some places they were welcomed—some embraced them, some tolerated them. Other places, however, the leaders felt threatened. When Stephen accuses the leaders of not keeping the law, of being like those who killed the prophets in the killing of Jesus, he is put to death.

Luke 23:33-34a, 46 are a few verses speaking of Jesus’ own death on the cross, and his plea for God to forgive those who were carrying out his execution, for they knew not what they were doing. These verses ought to be used to juxtapose against those that are sometimes lifted up to accuse all of the Jews of participating in the death of Jesus. We are wise to remember it was not only the religious leaders who accused Jesus, but the Roman leaders who sentenced Jesus to death, and Jesus’ own friends who betrayed him and abandoned him. Yet, Jesus asks for forgiveness for all of them, and so we ought not to be holding score two thousand years later.

What does it mean for us to witness for Jesus today, to share the story of God’s love through Christ with the world? For one thing, it means stopping the myths that have perpetuated for years that continue hate and anti-Semitism. It also means understanding that persecution still exists in parts of the world, but in the United States, others at times have faced persecution by Christians. It means, as the letter of 1 Peter reminds us, that when we are born from above, we have genuine love for one another. It means we really see one another as human beings and we care deeply about their needs and their relationship with the Divine, and while we know the way to God through Jesus Christ, to truly love another means to see where they are coming from as well.

Call to Worship (from 1 Peter 1:20-23)

We have been born anew,

 **Not of seed that dies, but of seed that can never die.**

Because of this, we have genuine mutual love,

 **So we are called to love one another deeply from the heart.**

Through Christ we have come to trust in God,

 **For God raised Christ from the dead and gave him glory.**

Come, worship Christ, who was destined before the foundation of the world;

 **Come, grow together in faith and hope set on God.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

At times, loving Christ, we do not trust in You. We make the claim but we deceive ourselves and others. We fail to love one another with mutual love and respect. We fail to see one another as siblings of the faith. We fall into our old patterns and ways of thinking that put ourselves first instead of serving others first. Forgive us. Call us into Your ways by following Your example: to love our neighbors as ourselves, to become last of all and servant of all. In Your name, the Name that redeems us all, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Christ continues to call us into repentance, which simply means to turn back to God. Turn back, follow God’s ways, love one another, serve Christ, and seek peace and justice. Come, let us enter the gates of thanksgiving, knowing that Christ has welcomed us all, sinners redeemed by the grace of God. Amen.

Prayer

Holy Seed, planted in us: help us to grow into our fullest potential. Holy Water, poured upon us: help us to be filled with the water of eternal life. Holy Soil, surrounding us: nourish us when we are in need. Holy Light, feeding us: empower us to live into Your ways of light and love and to help others to grow into who You have created them to be. For You are the True Gardener, who has planted each of us, and calls us forth from the depths into the great wondrous world of life. Help us to grow in You. Amen.