Worship Resources for April 7th, 2019—Fifth Sunday of Lent

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 43:16-21; Psalm 126; Philippians 3:4b-14; John 12:1-8

Narrative Lectionary: Last Judgment, Matthew 25:31-46 (Psalm 98:7-9)

Continuing the theme of pointing toward hope in the Hebrew scriptures during Lent, God speaks through the prophet Isaiah to the people who are preparing to return from exile. God, who brought them out of slavery in Egypt, who brought them through the waters, is about to do a new thing. God will make a way through the wilderness and desert, as God did before. All of creation will honor God, for the Creator provides for the people in the wilderness, the very people God created so they might declare God’s praise. By providing for the chosen people, God provides for all of creation.

The psalmist praises God for returning to Zion, returning home to the city promised them out of exile in Psalm 126. Among the nations, the people are praised because other nations see what God has done for the people of Israel. The psalmist asks God to restore the fortunes of the people, the way God fills the rivers in the wilderness. Those who left weeping will return home rejoicing.

Paul, writing from prison to the church in Philippi, uses his own life as an example of living for Christ and not for one’s self in Philippians 3:4b-14. He speaks of when he persecuted the church for what he thought was right, but that it was meaningless in the face of Christ. In knowing Christ, all that Paul strove for before was nothing. In losing everything, gaining Christ was the only thing with meaning. Striving for Christ means leaving the rest behind, even worldly understandings of success, and following the heavenly call of God.

Jesus is anointed in Bethany by Mary, the sister of Martha and Lazarus in John 12:1-8. In the other gospels the woman is unnamed, but in John’s account, this takes place after Lazarus was raised from the dead. Judas questions Mary’s extravagant gift, and how it ought to have been used, but Jesus tells him to leave her alone, that she did this to prepare him for his burial, to be reminded that right now, they have him. Mary, having lost her brother to death then having him raised, is all too aware of the cost of death. Mary’s anointing of Jesus is an acknowledgment that they will not have him forever.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the final lesson Jesus tells in Matthew’s Gospel account. In 25:31-46, Jesus describes all the nations gathered on the day of judgment, people separated from one another as a shepherd separates out the sheep from the goats. The king will invite those to come inherit the kingdom, the ones who fed the hungry, gave water to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked, cared for the sick and visited those in prison. The king says that just as they did it unto the least among them, they did it to him. In the same way, those who didn’t do these things to others will not inherit the kingdom, for as they did not do it to one of the least among them, they did not do it to God. In the end, the way we have lived out our life, the way we have lived out God’s love, is what matters.

Psalm 98:7-9 is the ending of this psalm of praise to God. All of creation praises God who is coming to judge the earth. God will judge the world with righteousness, and the peoples with equity.

How we live our lives is the true testament to faith. Our actions show where our heart is. For Mary, anointing Jesus was her way of seeing him right then. While Judas wondered how many people they could have helped who were poor, Mary was acknowledging that Jesus was with them, right in that moment. They would always have opportunities to help the poor around them, but not to show their love and care for their friend. When Jesus spoke of the day of judgment, he spoke of the consistent actions of those who are faithful—not necessarily those who followed him, or those who even knew of him, but that those who are consistently feeding the hungry, caring for the sick, visiting the imprisoned—the consistency speaks of a life that loves one’s neighbor, and therefore, loves God.

Call to Worship (from Isaiah 43:18-19)

Do not remember the ways of the past;

**Do not consider the things of old.**

For God is about to do a new thing;

**It is springing up all around us!**

God will make a way through the wilderness;

**God will lead us through the deserted places.**

Come, follow Christ, who is leading us into new life;

**Come, worship God, whose presence is with us always.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that sometimes we only pay lip service to Your commandment to love one another. We say we love one another, but do not minister to the needs around us. We say we love one another, but fail to see those who are struggling under oppression. We say we love one another, but we ignore the calls for justice and focus on our own lives. Forgive us. Call us into a consistent life, where our values of love, justice, and peace align with both our words and our actions. Call us into Your way of life, in which we truly love one another, meeting the needs of others, and welcoming the stranger among us. Call us to follow You, in all we say and do. In Jesus’ name. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Over and over the psalms sing to us that God’s steadfast love endures forever. There is no time when God will stop loving you. There is nothing you can do that will remove God’s love from you. God’s steadfast love is with you, now and always. Know that You are loved, live into the ways of repentance, forgiveness, and restoration, and share the love of God in word and deed. Amen.

Prayer

God of Peace, grant us peace when our hearts are in turmoil. Grant us peace when we feel hopeless in the world. Grant us peace when there is hate and violence all around. Grant us Your peace, that calls us to work for justice, to welcome the stranger, and to truly love our neighbors. Prince of Peace, lead us in Your ways. Amen.