Worship Resources for April 9, 2017—Palm and Passion Sunday

Revised Common Lectionary:

Palm Sunday: Psalm 118: 1-2, 19-29; Matthew 21:1-11

Passion Sunday: Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 31:9-16; Philippians 2: 5-11; Matthew 26:14-27:66 or Matthew 27:11-54

Narrative Lectionary: Triumphal Entry, Luke 19:29-44 (Psalm 118:19-23 or vs. 20)

We begin the Liturgy of the Palms with a portion from Psalm 118, singing of entering the gates of the temple. The selection from the psalm includes praise and petition, a liturgy for entering the temple of God. The people who were rejected by the world have become the cornerstone of God’s reign, and they call upon God to save them.

Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem as told by Matthew echoes back to the prophet Zechariah, in 9:9 of the humility of the king entering Jerusalem. However, Matthew misunderstands the refrain of Hebrew poetry, which is why Jesus appears to be riding on two donkeys in this passage. But the crowd that has followed Jesus is delighted that the prophet from Galilee has come, though the city itself is in turmoil—and this sets the course of action for the rest of the week. The peace that they understood (Pax Romana) has been disturbed, by a king not arriving on a warhorse, but humble on a donkey.

The readings for Passion Sunday begin with the prophet Isaiah speaking of his own experience of being humiliated and rejected, but knowing that God was with him. The prophet calls upon those who have also been rejected to come and stand with him, knowing that God is the one who will come to his aid.

Psalm 31:9-16 seeks deliverance and pleads with God for relief. The psalmist is utterly dejected, broken from abuse and weariness, and is as good as dead. But the psalmist holds out hope for God’s aid. Despite feeling as if their life is over, as if they are as good as dead, they trust in God’s deliverance from their enemies, and in God’s steadfast love.

Philippians 2:5-11 contains the ancient confession of Jesus as Paul recorded it to the church in Philippi, that Jesus, though he was equal with God, became humble like one of us. Jesus did not come to us to be God on earth, but rather to be one of us, even entering our death. In this confession, the hope is that every one in heaven and earth would confess that Jesus is Lord; that Jesus, becoming like us, is then exalted above all others.

Matthew 26:14-27:66 contains Jesus’ Passion. Matthew’s account varies from the other Gospel accounts in a few ways: it contains the story of Judas’ repentance, not found elsewhere. Matthew references that Barabbas was also known by the name Jesus, in that Pilate asks the people if they want Jesus Barabbas, or Jesus who is called the Messiah, to be released. Matthew also reports that Pilate had the tomb made secure based on the fears of the religious leaders that Jesus’ disciples would claim Jesus rose from the dead—a fear not found in the other Gospel accounts. And while scholars often caution against John’s account that can fuel anti-Semitism in its references to the Jews, Matthew is also dangerous with the people accepting the responsibility for Jesus’ blood, on them and their children—again, a reference not found in the other Gospel accounts.

The shorter portion of the passage ends at verse 54, with the centurion declaring, “Truly, this man was God’s Son!” There is a sense in reading through Matthew’s Gospel in its entirety that the outsiders understand who Jesus is, not those who should understand the scriptures, including the priests and the Pharisees and the scribes. However, Matthew also makes it clear that the disciples didn’t understand, either—as they all deserted him, betrayed him or denied him. From the magi that came from the east at his birth, to the Centurion at his death, it is the foreigners, the outsiders, who reveal who Christ is to the world.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Jesus’ entry into Jerusalem from Luke’s account. In Luke’s version, after entering Jerusalem, Jesus weeps over it, and predicts its eventual demise (Luke was most likely written after the fall of Jerusalem). The leaders will not listen, and Jesus laments that the city did not recognize what would bring it peace.

The Narrative Lectionary also uses part of Psalm 118, focusing on the entrance to the temple, and the rejection of the stone that has become the chief cornerstone—a phrase the Gospel writers later use as an image for Jesus.

We want God to enter our lives and to save us. We demand that God fix our broken world. But when God intervenes, we hesitate, and we reject God’s actions. Again and again, we make the mistake of not understanding what we are asking for, and not wanting what God wants for us. God did not send a warrior but a humble servant. God did not send a king to rule but a servant who serves. God sent us Jesus, who became like us because we could not become like God, but in our common humanity with Jesus, we find the likeness of God.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 118:1, 27-28; Matthew 21:19)

O give thanks to the Lord, for he is good!

**God’s steadfast love endures forever!**

Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.

**Hosanna in the highest heaven!**

The Lord is our God, and has given us light;

**Great is our God, and we give thanks to the Lord.**

Hosanna to the Son of David!

**Hosanna! Save Us, O God. Hosanna! God’s steadfast love endures forever.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Savior God, we confess that we need You because we cannot fulfill Your desire for the world alone. We confess that our salvation is caught up in the salvation of others and cannot be personal without it being collective first; for You sent the Only Son for the world, that whoever believes may not die but have eternal life. You sent the Only Son not to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through the One. We confess our need of Christ, and we confess our need to serve one another. Guide us to seek to save the world, not only ourselves, by serving one another and loving our neighbor as ourselves, meeting their needs before our own desires. Hosanna! Save us, O God. In the name of Christ, the Only Son, the Savior, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God did not send the Only Son to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through the One. There is no condemnation in Christ. Come, know that you are forgiven, and share God’s love by serving one another and meeting the needs of the world in love, justice, and peace. Amen.

Prayer

On this Sunday, O God, we remember how quickly we change. How fickle we are, how we pledge our devotion one moment and turn our backs the next. We go from shouting “Hosanna! Save Us!” to “Crucify Him.” We declare that we love our neighbors and then we turn our backs on the homeless and hungry in our communities. We speak up for change and justice in one breath, and then continue unjust practices in daily lives by what we consume and the needs we ignore. Forgive us, O God, for we are half-hearted believers. Forgive us, O God, for we are partial justice warriors. Forgive us, O God, for we tire easily and we forget, and we grow weary. Forgive us, restore us, and renew us for the journey of faith, so that we might become whole people who live wholly into Your vision of new life. In the name of Christ, who lived into the fullness of humanity, and whom we follow. Amen.