Worship Resources for May 12, 2013—Seventh Sunday of Easter, Ascension Sunday, Mother’s Day

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 1:1-11 or 16:16-34; Psalm 47 or 93 or 97; Luke 24:44-53 or John 17:20-26; Ephesians 1:15-23 or Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21

Acts 1:1-11 is Luke’s second account of the ascension (the first account is one of the Gospel selections today in Luke 24). Luke is the only Gospel writer who includes an ascension story (Mark 16:19-20 also contains an ascension version but is part of the longer ending of Mark that is not in most ancient versions. The author of Luke is writing from the world-view that he knows—that the earth is flat, that there are layers of heaven above and that the land of the dead is below the earth (the association of Hell with the land below comes into play in the first century but is not completely formed yet—it was not part of Jewish thought and came from Greek world-views). So of course it makes sense that Jesus would “ascend” into the highest heaven to be one with God. But we shouldn’t get too caught up in this. Even in this ascension account, two angels speak to the disciples and say, “Why do you stand looking up toward heaven? This Jesus… will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven” (vs. 11). In other words, don’t get too caught up about looking into the future, or looking up above, or looking away, because Jesus is going to enter our lives again. Jesus is going to be present with us here and now. And as we prepare for Pentecost and the coming of the Holy Spirit, we know that God’s presence is among us, not far off in some distant place we cannot reach. No, God is very near.

Acts 16:16-34 tells the story of how Paul and Silas were arrested and put into prison. After an earthquake, all the doors are opened and the chains are broken, but Paul and Silas don’t run away, and in doing so they save the jailer, both literally saving his physical life and saving him in sharing the Good News of Jesus. The jailer and his entire family are baptized immediately. It is Paul and Silas’ act of courage to stay rather than run—their act of showing faithfulness even in the midst of injustice that convinces the jailer to change his life. We are reminded of those who are arrested for nonviolent protests, who refuse to commit crimes but stand on their principles of justice and peace, and the witness they share of God’s love and justice and mercy, standing in the line of Paul and Silas, standing up for justice.

Psalm 47 sings of God as a king, a king of all nations. This psalm serves as another reminder that even the ancient Hebrews began to see God as the God of all people, and not just their own God. Using their world-view, they proclaim God as King above all (for kings had the most power and authority in their world). All other kings and princes bow down to the one King who is above all, for this King is our God, who made all people.

Psalm 93 also sings of God as a king, but as the king who is Creator of the earth. God is seen as the ancient king, his throne being established from of old; a king who reigns forever.

Psalm 97 is the third psalm that portrays God as a king, and this time it is a warrior king, a king who is to be feared, a king who conquers. This king protects the faithful, the one true king. The last line of this psalm reminds the people to rejoice that this king is their God!

Luke 24:44-53 is the first ascension story as told by the author of Luke-Acts. In this passage, Jesus’ last words to those present with him—the disciples—is to remind them that all scripture must be fulfilled. The author of Luke believes that Jesus fulfills all the scriptures, even the law of Moses. Jesus says, “You are witnesses of these things.” They have witnessed life overcome death, they have witnessed the resurrection, they have witnesses the fulfillment of the promises of God for new life and new hope. In this version, they worship him as he ascends, and then they return to Jerusalem. The last verse reminds us that these disciples were still Jewish. They still went to the temple, and they praised God. The role of the disciples now is to be witnesses of Jesus, to share the story of his life, death and resurrection.

John 17:20-26 contains Jesus’ prayer for unity. Jesus seems to know that even his disciples will scatter, will divide and separate, but Jesus prays that they may all be one. Just as Jesus and the father are one, so Jesus prays that we will also be one with Jesus, and with each other. This oneness comes through love. When we love one another as Jesus loved us, we are sharing God’s love. John’s Gospel makes this point many times throughout the Gospel of John—that Jesus and God the Father are one, and so we are one in him through God’s love. We ought to love one another because God first loved us. We ought to love one another as if it was God loving them, for we ought to be one with God.

Ephesians 1:15-23 is a prayer from Paul (or as most scholars believe, a disciple of Paul’s), praying for God’s wisdom and revelation to be among the followers of Jesus. This passage also describes Jesus as being seated with God in “the heavenly places” (again, we must remember the world-view of the day), and all things are under Jesus. Jesus is also the head of the church, which is his body (a favorite metaphor of Paul’s found in 1 Corinthians 12), “the fullness of him who fills all in all” (Ephesians 1:23). Just as Jesus prayed in John’s Gospel that they might be one, as he and God were one, so the writer in Ephesians uses this image of unity in Christ through the body—in other words, we experience the fullness of God in the community of the faithful.

Revelation 22:12-14, 16-17, 20-21 contain the ending of Revelation, minus the verses of “warning.” If I were to use this reading I probably would include them, as it is a pet peeve of mine that the lectionary seems to leave out the troubling verses! For it is clear that those left out are those that choose to be left out—those who put their own desires above the needs of others, those who look away from God and look to worldly pleasures to satisfy them. But those who are not left out are those who desire relationship with Jesus, those who put their desires on Christ to be in unity with God and with others. And we are reminded in these last words of our Bible that our hope is in Jesus, and that we do hope for Jesus to come again into our lives in a new way. Amen!

This Sunday, we are reminded that the world-view we hold now is not the same as the ancient Israelites, nor is it the same as the people of Jesus’ day and of the first century, nor will it be the same in the future. We must be prepared for new understandings and insights, new ways of thinking about and understanding God and God’s works in the world.

As this is Mother’s Day, we need to be mindful that there are people in our church community who had abusive mothers, and mothers who were absent. There may be some struggling with infertility and loss. Mother’s Day may be a very difficult day to celebrate in a church community, so proceed with caution. Once upon a time celebrating mothers was a special day in the life of the church, and an honor to lift up mothers and women. It still can be, but our world-view is changing. We are learning to honor and recognize people where they are at, and recognizing that Mother’s Day can be a difficult day.

Call to Worship

We praise You, God, who loves us like a mother and a father,

 **We thank You for sending us Your Only Son.**

You have loved us and called us Your children

 **Christ has called us brothers and sisters.**

For whoever does the will of God,

 **Is part of the family of Jesus.**

Come, let us worship our God

 **Our Creator, our Parent, the One who loves us most! Amen!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we come to You recognizing our own narrow view of the world. We look at things through our own eyes, through our own experiences. Open us to the experiences of others, to the world view of those who struggle and have suffered. Open us to new understandings, so that we might see a glimpse through Your eyes, of the world and all of who we are as Your children. In the name of Christ, who continues to challenge us on this faith journey, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

We recognize Jesus in the breaking of the bread. In recognizing Jesus, we recognize our brothers and sisters in the world. We seek forgiveness, and give our forgiveness, knowing that Jesus forgives and loves us all. Amen.

Prayer

Architect of the Universe, You gave us this green earth with blue oceans to live upon. We are so, so small in the scope of all things that are. We see the universe through our eyes that can see so little; even together, with all the great minds that have ever lived, we know scant about what You have done and are doing and will continue to do in the universe. Help us to grow our world view so that we can see and understand Your ways in greater depth. Challenge us beyond what we think we know and see, and remind us that You are the Creator of the earth, the sun, the stars, the galaxy, the entire universe, and so much more beyond what we know and experience. In the name of Christ, who comes from You to guide us on the way. Amen.