Worship Resources for May 14, 2017—Fifth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 7:55-60; Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16; 1 Peter 2:2-10; John 14:1-14

Narrative Lectionary: Council at Jerusalem, Acts 15:1-18 (Luke 2:29-32)

The apostle Stephen is among the first martyrs after Jesus’ resurrection. Stephen began arguing with some of the leaders of the Jews from around the Mediterranean living in Jerusalem about Scripture. The leaders didn’t like Stephen’s interpretation and understanding of the law and customs of Moses. When Stephen was brought before the council in Jerusalem, he argued, from the time of Abraham through David and Solomon, that God does not dwell in buildings but in the Holy Spirit dwells in all. But when the council heard this, Stephen declared that he had a vision of Jesus at the right hand of God—and the people dragged him out in front of Saul and killed him. Echoing the words of Christ on the cross, Stephen commits his spirit to Jesus and asks for forgiveness for those who have killed him.

The words, “Into your hand I commit my spirit,” are spoken by the psalmist in a plea for deliverance in Psalm 31:1-5, 15-16. The psalmist calls upon God for rescue but also puts their trust in God. “My times are in your hand.” The psalmist knows that God is the only one who can deliver them from their enemies, and the psalmist believes this will happen because God is their rock and fortress, and God will save them in God’s steadfast love.

We continue reading the letter of 1 Peter with the metaphor of being fed spiritual milk, a metaphor Paul also used in 1 Corinthians 3:2 and the writer of Hebrews in 5:12, and then the writer echoes Psalm 34:8, “taste and see that the Lord is good.” Next, the writer uses the image of a living stone, rejected like the stone that became the cornerstone. A living stone can be made into a spiritual home by God, and the cornerstone is Christ. Stones cause others to stumble, but the ones who are faithful are chosen by God and have become God’s people, the dwelling-place for God.

John 14:1-14 is part of Jesus’ final discourse to the disciples before his betrayal and arrest. Here, Jesus speaks of going ahead to prepare a place for those who follow him, but the disciples do not understand. Jesus tells them that they know the way to where he is going, but Thomas says, “We don’t know where you are going. How can we know the way?” Jesus then declares, “I am the way, and the truth, and the life; no one gets to the Father except through me.” Jesus is saying this to the very disciples who have been with him the whole time and should have known! He even said to them that they know the way, then Thomas disputed it. Next, Philip says, “Lord, show us the Father and we will be satisfied.” I imagine Jesus’ expression of disbelief. “Don’t know you know that I am in the Father and the Father is in me?” Jesus’ words here are not for outsiders of the faith, but for insiders—for those who thought they were so close to Jesus. Those words are for us, because even those who believe they are close to God sometimes miss the point. Jesus tells them, “Believe I am in the Father and the Father is in me.” Believe. Don’t keep trying to prove it. Believe.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the Jerusalem Council as told by Acts 15:1-18. Paul gives an alternative version of this story in Galatians 2:1-14, but at the heart of the council discussion is whether or not Gentile Christians need to follow the requirements of the law of Moses, including circumcision and dietary restrictions. The writer of Acts, Luke, has told his version in which Peter appears to agree with Paul and Barnabas of the faith of the Gentiles and that they are saved by their faith in Christ. This counters Paul’s account in Galatians, in which Peter shies away from this perspective and refuses to eat with Gentiles and others. Paul basically calls him out for his hypocrisy, but in the version in Acts, the assembly seems to come to a conclusion of acceptance of Gentiles with a few provisions about abstaining from meat sacrificed to idols.

Luke 2:29-32 contain the words of Simeon, the man who was told he would not die until he had seen the Messiah, and held the baby Jesus in the temple, declaring that Jesus would be a light of revelation to the Gentiles in addition to being the Messiah for his own people.

Stephen died a martyr in front of his own people. Jesus spoke about being the Way, and the Truth, and the Life to the disciples. The Jerusalem Council, while focused on the question of including Gentiles, was really about exposing the hypocrisy within the early church. Sometimes the people who need to hear the Gospel message most are not on the outside, but those who are on the inside, for we have forgotten it. Our senses have been dulled to the appreciation and understanding of Scripture and the Good News—we think we know it all. Just like the disciples, who listened to Jesus but still didn’t know the way, we need to believe. We need to listen. We need to recognize that while we may judge others, the one who we need to judge is ourselves, for often we are the ones who have gone astray.

Call to Worship

In times of hardship and doubt,

**Believe because of the good works you see in the world.**

In times of struggle and pain,

**Believe because of the love you feel from one another.**

In times of cynicism and skepticism,

**Believe because you know you are not alone.**

Believe because Christ dwells in you,

**And through us, Christ will do great things.**

**Come, worship Christ, who is doing something new in us.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Creation, we confess that at times we doubt. At times we are skeptical. At times we look around and what we see isn’t good. We don’t experience hope or joy, and we wonder when things will ever get better again. Lift us up. Help us to find the good in this world and to hold on. Help us to find the good in each other and to draw it out. Help us to help one another, to make this world a better place, for we know that wherever we are gathered, You are among us, for You dwell in us. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Sometimes it is hard to believe, but God believes in us. God believes in us so much that we were made in God’s image, given a sacred charge to care for the earth, and then, God sent the Only Son to us, so that we might know life eternal. Go into the world knowing that whatever your doubts, God believes in you, God trusts in you, and God knows you will do great things in God’s name. Amen.

Prayer

Mothering God, You brought us forth into this world, born of Your Spirit. Teach us how to live and care for one another in this world, to know that the world is big enough for all of us as long as we take only what we need. Help us to care for this earth the way You care for us. Teach us how to live as siblings with one another, to bring out the best in each of us. As You are doing something new in this world, call upon us to be midwives, to help birth Your new creation into being. In the name of Christ, our companion on this journey of faith, we pray. Amen.