Worship Resources for May 3rd, 2020—Fourth Sunday of Easter

Revised Common Lectionary: Acts 2:42-47; Psalm 23; 1 Peter 2:19-25; John 10:1-10

Narrative Lectionary: Church at Thessalonica, Acts 17:1-9, 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10 (Mark 13:9-11)

After the day of Pentecost, the believers began to gather in each other’s homes, and thus the first churches began in Acts 2:42-47. They broke bread together, prayed together, and listened to the apostles’ teachings. Those who believed lived together, shared everything together, selling their possessions and distributing the proceeds to the poor. What’s more, the entire community was in awe, and these first churches had the goodwill of the people as they grew.

The ancient song of comfort, often attributed to David, sings of God as the shepherd who leads us into safety in Psalm 23. God is our shepherd who leads us to safe pastures and still waters, restoring our soul. Even in the valley of the shadow of death, God is protecting us, leading us through. God prepares a table of honor even in front of enemies, and God’s blessings and mercy are always with us.

The writer of 1 Peter explains that Christ is with the people in their suffering in 2:19-25. They have done nothing wrong, but have endured pain in injustice, as Christ did. Therefore, the faithful ought to follow the path of Christ, entrusting themselves to God’s ways. The world is unjust, and the faithful will suffer, but through Christ, the faithful live for righteousness, following the call of their shepherd.

Jesus speaks of being the gate for the sheep in John 10:1-10. A thief enters the sheepfold by stealth and climbing in, but the shepherd of the sheep enters by the gate. The sheep will not listen to the thief, and those who came before Jesus (there were others in the first century claiming to be the Messiah) were thieves and bandits, they only come to kill and destroy. Those who enter by the gate will be saved.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the church in Thessalonica. In Acts 17:1-9, Luke gives the account of Paul and Silas arriving in Thessalonica and speaking in a synagogue there, taking three weeks (three Sabbath days) to argue and explain his belief in Jesus as the Messiah. Some Greeks, especially women in leadership, began to also listen to Paul and Silas. Some of the leaders went to arrest Paul and Silas, but couldn’t find them. Instead, they took Jason into custody, who had been Paul and Silas’ host. The accusation from the leaders was that Paul and Silas were trying to get people to worship another king (other than Caesar) named Jesus, but the city officials took bail from Jason and others and let them go.

Paul’s own words share greetings to the church in Thessalonica and how the church responded to him in 1 Thessalonians 1:1-10. This letter is considered by scholars to be the earliest letter of Paul, therefore, the oldest part of the New Testament. The church in Thessalonica had a special place in Paul’s heart because of how they took on the message of Christ that Paul shared with them, and they became an example to believers in the surrounding areas. The believers nearby heard how the Thessalonians turned away from idols and began to worship the living and true God, and wait for the return of Christ.

In Mark 13:9-11, Jesus foretells that the apostles will face persecution and be turned over to the local authorities. They will be beaten and abused, but they are not to worry about being put on trial—God will be with them, and will speak through them, as they proclaim the gospel.

What does it mean to be the church? How can we be the church and share the Good News when many of us are still inside our homes, unable to gather in person? What can we learn from the early church about who and how we share the Gospel, in this covid-19 world? Paul sent letters, sharing encouragement, and reminding the early churches how they were an example to others. The church in Acts did what they could to pray together and break bread together—perhaps we do that virtually now. How can we listen for the Shepherd’s voice in the midst of social media, protests, and opinions? How can we remember our roots, and who we are called to be right now?

Unison Call to Worship

**We are the church.**

**We join our hearts together.**

**We listen for the word of God through scripture.**

**We feel each other’s joy and sorrow as we share in prayer together.**

**Today, we will break bread together, and remember we are one,**

**Though we cannot be together; we are the church,**

**And we gather across time and space to worship God now.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess our frustration and our anger. We confess at times we should have held our tongue and didn’t. We confess at times we are distracted by things that will not matter tomorrow, and they consume our time today. We confess that in our uncertainty, instead of trusting in You, we turn to the voices of fear. Forgive us. Call us into accountability, to remind us that at times we say things online we would not say in person. Call us to repent, to turn to empathy and understanding, and to seek Your wisdom. In this world that has turned upside down, we remember that You are our Rock and our Salvation. You are what grounds us, keeps us steady, and will see us through. Remind us that You have commanded us to love our neighbors as ourselves, even the ones who irritate us, for You loved us first, with all our faults and shortcomings. May we turn our hearts to You, and be filled with love for one another. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Peace be in your heart. Peace be on your tongue, and know you are forgiven; seek to speak in love. Peace be in your gut, to calm the rage that you feel; channel your anger into positive work for justice. Peace be in your hands, to help those in need, rather than to harm those who’ve hurt you. Peace be in your soul, knowing that you are not alone. God is with you, in the friends who share their love with you. Peace be in your heart. Peace be with you. Amen.

Prayer

Holy One, as we turn to You, turn our hearts to each other. May we reach out and check in with those we haven’t heard from, to offer a listening ear, and to share the Good News. May we seek to learn how we might pray for each other, how we might help one another, and how we can reflect Your image in the world. Holy One, shine in us Your love, so we might be shining lights of Your reflection around the world. Amen.