Worship Resources for July 28, 2013—Tenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Hosea 1:2-10 or Genesis 18:20-32; Psalm 85 or Psalm 138; Luke 11:1-13; Colossians 2:6-19

The prophet Hosea had a difficult life. He continues our first thread in this season after Pentecost in the Hebrew Scriptures of prophets who stood up for God’s justice even when it was unpopular. Hosea goes to the extreme of marrying a prostitute, as an example of how Israel has behaved in relationship to God. Hosea has children named “God Sows” and “Not pitied,” and “Not my people.” But through Hosea’s life, we are made to understand that God will not abandon us, that God will restore and will reclaim the children who left. Despite Israel’s unfaithfulness to God, God remains faithful, and will restore what has been lost.

Genesis 18:20-32 is the story of Abraham bargaining with God over the fate of Sodom and Gomorrah. Our second thread in the Hebrew Scriptures this season shares with us the promises of God, how God is faithful to the covenant. The people of Sodom and Gomorrah have turned from God and worship other gods, primarily with male temple prostitutes. God is about to destroy the city completely, near where Abraham’s nephew Lot lives. So Abraham begins to bargain with God. Suppose there are 50 righteous people—won’t you save the cities for the 50 righteous? God replies that no, God will not. Then Abraham continues to bargain down until, if he can find ten, God will not destroy the cities. We know that they are destroyed in the next chapter, but we see that even among Abraham, the idea of total and utter destruction is abhorrent. This is not God’s ways. It happens at times, but this is not what God desires. God’s covenant is about restoration and hope, and as one reads the Bible, the utter destruction of an entire community is never the ultimate plan, but rather, restoration is. But it will take some time for the people to turn from their ways, and for their understanding of God’s justice to change.

Psalm 85 is a song of restoration, remembering that God is the God of restoration. God will restore the people when they turn astray. God will make things right that have been wrong. God is the God of justice. God’s justice leads to peace. God’s justice, once again, is not about punishment but about restoration.

Psalm 138, a song of thanksgiving, praises God for God’s faithfulness, for God’s care not only for the powerful, but the powerless. God’s love endures forever, and God will not forget.

Luke 11:1-13 contains Luke’s version of the Lord’s Prayer and also what it means to persevere. We are called to persevere in our prayers, asking God for what we need, and that God’s gifts are good. Sometimes our prayers are not answered the way we want them to be, but Jesus reminds us in this prayer that we are to ask for what we need, and that we need forgiveness. And in order to receive forgiveness, we must also forgive. In the same way, we must persevere in helping to meet the needs of others, so that our needs may also be met.

Colossians 2:6-19 is a warning against falling into the common strain of thoughts in that day—the Greek philosophy that embedded the cultural teachings, and the Greek mythology of the universe. The writer reminds the listener that our faith is rooted in Christ, not in human ways of thinking. For us today, things like the prosperity gospel—the idea that God has blessed you with what you have because you are good and earned it—would fall into the same category of human philosophy. These sorts of ideas have infiltrated the Church throughout our history—ideas that if you are truly saved you have had a certain type of religious experience such as speaking in tongues, for example.

So just what is God’s plan for us? What is it that God desires for us? The prosperity gospel would teach us that if we work hard enough and are good enough, God will bless us with riches in this life. Others would teach us that we have to worship or have a specific worship experience in a certain way in order to experience the true God. Still others would tell us if we are good we go to heaven, if we are bad we go to hell. But when we look in the scriptures, what we find is an evolving thought that God’s desire is restoration, not punishment. Punishment is our understanding of the consequences of our own actions when they don’t work out for us. It feels like God has abandoned us. Rather, God has not abandoned us, but the false god that said if we were good enough good things would happen. Instead, Jesus tells us that God sends rain to the righteous and the unrighteous. But what happens to those who are faithful is that we experience God’s restoration as justice—God brings down the high and raises up the low, as in the Magnificat. This can be painful for many of us to experience, but when we see through the lens of restoration instead of punishment, we experience the goodness of God in all things, even when we have to step down from whatever pillar we thought we were on. God’s desire, God’s plan for all of us, is restoration, and indeed, when we look at Genesis to Revelation, God is continually restoring creation, all the way to a new heaven and a new earth.

Call to Worship

We are the body of Christ

**We are the hands and feet of Christ in this world**

We are the body of Christ

**We must love others first in order for God’s love to be shared**

We are the body of Christ

**We are the ones called to feed the hungry, clothe the naked, house the homeless**

We are the body of Christ

**We must speak up for the silenced, and stand up for the oppressed**

We are the body of Christ

**Let us be the hands and feet of Christ in this world. Let us worship as the body, together!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of wholeness, at times we are broken, fractured by the injustice of the world we live in. We feel as if we are scattered and cannot pull ourselves together. But You are the one who made us. You are the one who goes to the farthest limits of the sea. You are the one who goes through life and death for us. You are the one who brings healing and wholeness, even when we cannot see it coming. Renew in us Your courage and strength, knowing that in times when we feel shattered, You will bind us together again. In the name of Christ, who went through life and death and resurrection for us, we pray. Amen,

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Even in the darkest of times, the sun still rises. Even on the foggiest night, the stars still shine. There is light in this world, and that light shines in the darkness and will not be overcome. You will rise again. You are forgiven, restored, and renewed. Amen.

Prayer

Author of Salvation, You craft a new story out of the ashes of the old. Where there is an ending, You turn the page and begin again. In places of injustice, write the story of restoration. In places of hate, write the story of love. In places of death, write the story of life, of hope. Grant us the ability to be partners with You, writing a new chapter in our own history, a story that embraces the fullness of Your love and life. In the name of Christ, who writes us into the book of Life, we pray. Amen.