Worship Resources for August 11th, 2019—Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20 and Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23; Genesis 15:1-6 and Psalm 33:12-22; Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16; Luke 12:32-40

Narrative Lectionary: Series on Hebrews, 11:1-16 (12:1-2); (Matthew 8:5-10)

In our first selection of the Hebrew scriptures, the prophet Isaiah receives a vision from God. God calls the people of Israel “the people of Sodom and Gomorrah,” showing that they are no better than the cities that were destroyed long ago. They have put their trust in their sacrifices and rituals that have become empty of meaning, because they do not seek God with them. God calls them to instead learn to do good, pursue justice, take up the cause of the oppressed, the poor, and the widow. The people are called to “argue” with God, to wrestle with their relationship with God and with one another, to seek God’s ways—and though this is a struggle, it is good to wrestle with doing justice and mercy, rather than turning to rituals that have lost their meaning.

Those that bring thanksgiving as their sacrifice honor God in Psalm 50:1-8, 22-23. The ones who live in God’s ways are the faithful. God does not rebuke the people for their sacrifices and offerings, which are always before God, but by the way they live. Those who forget God will be torn from the people, for God is the judge of all people.

Our second selection of the Hebrew scriptures is Genesis 15:1-6. Abram’s belief and trust in God is seen as righteousness, even though God has promised a child to him and Sarai, but they have been unable to have children. Abram worries that he has no heir and that all he has will go to a foreign slave born in his house. In ancient times, eternity was seen through inheritance—your possessions, but also your name, all of who you are, that was passed down throughout the ages. Abram worries that no one in his family will carry on. But God shows him the stars, and asks if Abram can count them. “So shall your descendants be,” God tells him.

Psalm 33:12-22 declares that God has chosen the people of Israel to be God’s heritage. The psalmist sings that it is God who delivers the people from their enemy, and the greatest enemy is death. God sees all of humanity, but kings and princes, even warriors, cannot save their people from death—only God can. God is the people’s strength and shield, and God’s steadfast love is with them. The psalmist calls upon the people to put their trust in God.

The epistle reading of Hebrews 11:1-3, 8-16 refers to the faith of Abraham, who set out into an unknown land, and was promised a child in his old age. Faith is the assurance of things hoped for; the conviction of things not seen. Abraham and his descendants, through the covenant, were promised more than they could see. They were people seeking a homeland, which God has prepared for them. In their lifetime, they saw only a glimpse, but the fullness of God’s promises is ready for them.

Jesus teaches the disciples to be prepared and to store up treasure that cannot be taken from them in Luke 12:32-40. Jesus addressed them as “little flock,” reminding them that they belong to God, and not of this world, as he teaches them to sell what they have, to give to those in need, to make purses that won’t wear out. Whatever they give value, that’s where their heart will be. Jesus also calls upon them to be ready, for “the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.” They are called to be alert, awake, and ready for Christ’s return.

The Narrative Lectionary concludes its series on Hebrews with a similar selection from the RCL this week, of 11:1-16 and 12:1-2. In this longer selection, the writer speaks of faith through all the ancestors, beginning with Abel through Abraham and Sarah, for faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. Though our ancestors did not see the fulfillment of all God’s promises, they saw a glimpse, and that was enough. And we now are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, we know we can live in faith, persevering with Christ who is now with God.

Matthew 8:5-10 tells the story of a Roman centurion in Capernaum, whose servant had become paralyzed. Jesus offered to come and cure him, but the centurion, understanding authority, knew that Jesus could heal his servant without coming all that way. Jesus declared he had not found anyone of such faith among his own people.

Faith is our way of life. Faith is not only trust in God, but faithfully living with love and compassion in our hearts, seeking justice. Faith is not rituals and tradition alone—rather, rituals and traditions point the way to God and can lead us to faith. Faith itself is a way of life. The ways of the world leads us to wealth and worldly measures of success, that are as empty as rituals and traditions that have lost their meaning. Rather, how we worship—what we do—ought to lead us to do justice, practice mercy and compassion, and loving our neighbors as ourselves.

Call to Worship (from Hebrews 11:1,3,8,13)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for,

**The conviction of things not seen.**

By faith we understand that the worlds were prepared by the word of God,

**So that what is seen was made from things that are not visible.**

By faith our ancestors set out for a place not knowing where they were going,

**By faith our ancestors saw only a glimpse of the promise, yet trusted God.**

By faith, we gather to worship our God,

**We trust in the glimpse of the promise we have received,**

**and hope in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Faithful One, we confess that we have at times been faithless. The pursuits of the world have captured our hearts. The promise of safety and security in wealth and worldly possessions is a temptation we fall for. The desire to consume never satisfies us, and we hunger and thirst for the wrong things. Forgive us for our faithlessness, O God. Call us back to Your ways of love and justice. Remind us that You are the Bread of Life, the Wellspring of Living Water. Our treasure is not in worldly possessions and wealth, but in the love we have for one another and You. Call us into the ways of Your reign, Your beloved community, where we can meet the needs of each other, where Your love can satisfy our longing. In the name of Christ, who gave up the ways of this world by laying down his life for us, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (Hebrews 11:1; 2 Corinthians 4:18)

Now faith is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen. For we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal. You are forgiven, loved, and restored. Go in faith, even when it’s hard, knowing that you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses in Christ. You belong to God, and no one can take that from you. Amen.

Prayer

Real One, we come before You, heart to heart. We long to be our true selves. Strip away the worldliness that clings to us, that causes us to seek wealth, notoriety, worldly success. Remove our burdens that weigh us down. Take away the shame and guilt that we use us to hide who we are. There is nothing to be ashamed of before You. Ease our fears that cause us to conceal our authenticity. There is nothing to be afraid of before You, for perfect love casts out fear. Real One, help us to be real, with You and with each other. Help us to drop the personas and the false pretenses, and be who we are, who You created us to be—Your beloved children. In the name of Jesus, who was so real he lived and died as one of us, laying down his life for us, we pray. Amen.