Worship Resources for August 23rd, 2020—Twelfth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 1:8-2:10 and Psalm 124; Isaiah 51:1-6 and Psalm 138; Romans 12:1-8; Matthew 16:13-20

Narrative Lectionary: Series on the Lord’s Prayer, Luke 11:2-4

As we near the halfway mark of the Season after Pentecost, we move into Exodus, away from the story of the ancestors of Abraham and Sarah through the children of Jacob, Rachel, Leah, and others, and into the story of the people descended from them. The time came when the Pharaohs of Egypt and their people forgot their relationship with Joseph and his brothers, and Pharaoh enslaved the Israelites, forcing them to do hard labor. Pharaoh also tasked the midwives with the job of killing any boys born to the Hebrews, but the midwives trusted God, and told Pharaoh that Hebrew women were so quick in labor the babies were born and nursed before they got there. So Pharaoh ordered all baby boys born to the Hebrews to be thrown into the river. When a Levite mother could no longer hide her son, she laid him in a basket at the edge of the Nile river, with his sister waiting to see what would happen. Pharaoh’s own daughter discovered him, and the baby’s sister offered to find a Hebrew nurse. Pharaoh’s daughter raised him as her own, naming him Moses, nursed by his own birth mother.

Psalm 124 is a song of praise, and thanksgiving for deliverance, alluding back to the people’s escape from Egypt. If God hadn’t been with the people, their enemies would have overtaken them, and the flood would have surpassed them. However, God has once again delivered the people. Like prey escaping the trap, the people of God have survived another day, for their help is in the Lord.

The second selection of the Hebrew scriptures continues to follow the prophets. Isaiah calls upon the people to listen to God in Isaiah 51:1-6, to look to their foundations, to their ancestors. God is bringing the people out of exile and God will bring comfort and healing to the land and the people. God’s justice is a light for the people, and God’s salvation is everlasting. Though earth and heaven will vanish, and all people die, God’s deliverance never ends.

The psalmist gives thanks to God for deliverance in Psalm 138. God answered the psalmist in their distress, increasing the psalmist’s trust and endurance. All kings shall know God and praise God, for they have heard the good news of God. God hears the call of those who are in distress and delivers them from their enemies, and God’s steadfast love endures forever.

Paul switches gears in his letter to the church in Rome, moving into a more general section about how to live as faithful followers of Christ in Romans 12:1-8. Paul discourages conformity to this world, and instead, to remind us that our bodies are presented before God, like a sacrifice—we give fully of ourselves to Christ. We are one body with many members, all with different spiritual gifts, and all valued by God. Paul warns against thinking we are greater than we are, but instead to think “with sober judgment” and to be humble, for God has gifted all according to the grace we receive in faith.

Jesus asks the disciples what people are saying about him, who they think he is in Matthew 16:13-20. The disciples respond with the answers they have heard: John the Baptist, Elijah, or one of the other prophets. But when Jesus asks them the question, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter is the first to respond, “You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God.” Jesus blesses Peter, for Peter has recognized this as a revelation from God, not from what anyone else has told him. Peter has recognized the ministry of Jesus as directly from God. Jesus declares that the foundation of the church, the assembly of the people, is being built right now on this declaration from Peter, and even hell cannot prevail against it. Jesus declares that the key to heaven is given to Peter and therefore, the church: that he understands the way, and that he has the authority to forgive sins as Jesus has forgiven sins. Then Jesus orders them sternly not to tell anyone that he is the Messiah. There is a sense Jesus wants others to understand the same way Peter did—to understand who Jesus is based on how Jesus lives and ministers before them, and not by the word of others.

(Same as last week) The Narrative Lectionary continues its four-part series on the Lord’s Prayer, the same scripture each week of Luke 11:2-4. See Working Preacher’s commentary and suggestions for preaching this series: <https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=2919> Here is the reflection I wrote back in 2016: Luke’s account is very short and doesn’t include all of the words Protestants use in the recitation of the Lord’s Prayer. All Jesus includes is this: Father, hallowed be your name (God our Parent/Father: your name is holy). Your Kingdom Come (God’s beloved community, God’s kin-dom, God’s reign, come). Give us each day our daily bread (fulfill our daily needs). And forgive us our sins, for we forgive everyone indebted to us (forgive others because you are forgiven; forgive others the things you ask for forgiveness for; forgive us, because we forgive others). And do not bring us to the time of trial (do not bring us to that point where we are tested beyond what we can face). That’s it—five statements. Five you can remember on your fingers. Five things we should pray for—the first two really are statements to God, not asking for anything, until we get to our daily bread, asking for forgiveness, and to not be led into trial.

We often look for signs that point toward God’s reign, or God at work in our world. But instead of looking for signs, Jesus is asking us to see himself at work in us and in our world, right now. Prophets point to the way, but Jesus himself is the Way. Scripture points the way, but Jesus is the Way. The kingdom is coming, but it is at hand, now, and we have the keys. We are the ones who have the authority to forgive sin and build the reign of God right now. But all too often, we are sitting back and waiting. We are still looking for signs, when the signs point to Jesus, who is right here with us, now and forever.

Call to Worship (Psalm 63:1, 3-4)

**O God, you are my God,**

**I seek you, my soul thirsts for you;**

**my flesh faints for you,**

**as in a dry and weary land where there is no water.**

**Because your steadfast love is better than life,**

**my lips will praise you.**

**So I will bless you as long as I live;**

**I will lift up my hands and call on your name.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that at times we are looking for the wrong things. We seek signs that You are with us, rather than recognizing Your presence is with us in all times. We seek assurances that we are going the right direction, hesitant to follow You as You called us to do. Help us to be brave, O God, and to move forward in faith, knowing You are with us. Give us courage, O God, to trust in Your ways. Guide us, O God, in wisdom and insight, to follow You, for You are the Way, the Truth, and the Life. It is in the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Psalm 139:7-10)

“Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence? If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there. If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea, even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.” God is with us, always, and there is no place we can go, nowhere we can be lost, from the presence and love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord. Know God’s love in your heart, know Christ’s peace in your mind, and know the presence of the Holy Spirit in your soul and your very bones. God is with you, now and always. Amen.

Prayer

God of Peace, we know that Your peace is only present through the hard work of justice. Call us into action: to be in solidarity with those who are oppressed, to be moved to compassion with those who suffer, to act against the empire that seeks to disrupt Your reign. Like the Hebrew midwives of along ago, help us to find our own ways to resist evil by doing good, to help the most vulnerable, and to follow the leadership that rises from those who are marginalized. This is hard work, O God. Call us to unlearn the ways of empire and supremacy, and instead, learn Your ways of love, justice, mercy, and hope. In Jesus’ name we pray. Amen.