Worship Resources for September 13th, 2020—Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 14:19-31 and Psalm 114 or Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21; Genesis 50:15-21 and Psalm 103: (1-7) 8-13; Romans 14:1-12; Matthew 18:21-35

Narrative Lectionary: Genesis 2:4b-7, 15-17, 3:1-8 (Luke 11:4)

In the first selection of the Hebrew Scriptures, we continue to follow the stories of the ancestors of the faith. The people of Israel escaped their captivity in Egypt, led by God as the pillar of cloud by day and fire by night. Moses, called by God, stretched his hand over the Red Sea and the people walked across dry land. The Egyptian oppressors pursued them, but their chariots became stuck in the mud, the army thrown into a panic because of God. Then, God told Moses to stretch out his hand once again, and the waters of the Red Sea flooded over the Egyptians, and they all drowned, but the people of Israel made it across on dry land. The Israelites saw and believed what God had done for them, and also believed in God’s servant, Moses.

Psalm 114 sings of God bringing the people led by Moses out of the Red Sea, and how God provided for the people in the wilderness. The psalmist calls upon all the people and the earth to tremble, because God provided water out of a rock, and brought forth springs of water to the thirsty people.

An alternative to Psalm 114 are the songs of Moses and Miriam in Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21. Moses begins by singing of how God has triumphed over the army of Pharaoh, how God is a warrior. God shattered their enemies, who sank like stones in the Red Sea. The image of God letting out breath through the nostrils is one found in other psalms, that as breath and wind are the same word as Spirit, God also breathes the Spirit as we do, and blows out, causing the floodwaters to wipe out the people’s oppressors. Moses asks in song, who is like their God? Who is the one who does wonders for the people? Miriam’s song echoes the beginning of Moses’ song, that God has thrown horse and rider into the sea. Miriam is first called a prophet here, and she dances and sings with the women of Israel.

The second selection of the Hebrew Scriptures shares Joseph’s words to his brothers in Genesis 50. Following Jacob’s death, Joseph’s brothers were worried that Joseph still had a grudge for what they had done. Instead, Joseph sees that God used what happened to him for good, though his brothers intended harm. Joseph was able to save them all by being sent to Egypt ahead of them. Joseph assures his brothers that he will not only provide for them, but for their children, as indeed Joseph’s legacy did until the time of Moses.

Psalm 103:1-13 begins with a blessing for God, and a reminder that God is the one who forgives, redeems, satisfies all needs, and restores the people. God is on the side of the oppressed, working for justice. God was made known to Moses and to the people of Israel. God deals with the people through steadfast love, not by holding sins against the people, for God is slow to anger. God is the one who forgives, removes transgressions, and has compassion for the people as a parent has compassion for their child.

The Epistle readings conclude the selections from Romans with 14:1-12. Paul gives instructions to the church in Rome, primarily Jewish, on how to welcome Gentiles. Some of the new converts would not eat meat that came from sacrifices in the Greek temples, and some of the Jewish believers no longer kept kosher. Paul warns the Romans not to judge but to accept these differences, the same with those who keep the Sabbath on the last day of the week and those who did not. All those practices were done to honor God, and therefore should not be used to judge others, upholding any one way as better than another. Instead, Paul reminds the Roman church that they live and die for Christ, not for themselves. All bow before God, not before each other; therefore, all are accountable to God for judgment, not as to what practices and customs they uphold.

Peter asks Jesus about forgiveness in Matthew 18:21-35. Peter wants to know how often he needs to forgive, thinking it’s quantifiable, but Jesus’ response shows that forgiveness is not only a process, but a way of life. Jesus then tells a parable about a servant who begged for forgiveness from the king, for the servant had a debt he could not repay. The king, out of pity, showed mercy, and granted him forgiveness. But after the servant was released, that servant went to a second servant who owed the first money. The first had the second thrown into prison because the second could not repay his debt. The other servants were upset at the injustice and complained to the king. The king had the first servant brought before him and judged him harshly, for the king had granted him mercy, but the first servant would not grant the same mercy to the second servant. The first servant was not transformed by the act of forgiveness granted him. So the king had the first servant tortured until he could pay his debt. Jesus told this story as a warning that forgiveness is not earned, but granted, and that the disciples must forgive others in the same way they were forgiven. Perhaps the torture is what happens to our hearts when we hold grudges and do not understand what a powerful gift forgiveness is.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the creation of humanity and the beginning of sin. In 2:4-7, the second account of creation, God made the Garden of Eden and breathed life into the only human being there was, making the being alive. In verses 15-17, God placed the human being in the garden with the commandment that the being could eat of any tree in the garden except the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, for on that day the being would die. Chapter 3 begins with the story of the first two human beings, now identified as a man and a woman, who are tempted by the serpent to eat the fruit of that very tree God told them not to eat. The serpent tells the beings they will become like God, and so first the woman, then the man, eat of the fruit. They become aware that they are naked, so they sew clothes for themselves, and they hide from God when they hear God walking through the garden. The fruit opened their minds, awakened them with an awareness that they were different, and that they ought to be ashamed.

Luke 11:4 is the portion of the prayer Jesus taught the disciples, asking God for forgiveness of sins as we forgive those who sin against us, and not to be brought to the time of trial.

We must be careful in how we preach these passages about sin and forgiveness. Too often, forgiveness has been used to abuse others, that victims must forgive their assailants, giving them a clean slate. Instead, Jesus teaches us that we ask for forgiveness as we forgive others. This is about forgiving others who do the same things we still do. The word “debt” instead of sin may be more helpful here, especially in interpreting Jesus’ parable. We cannot hold others to a higher standard than ourselves. Forgiveness is a process, and we begin to forgive, but must continue to work on forgiving as we continue to work on transforming our lives through repentance and reconciliation with Christ.

Call to Worship

**We gather our voices and spirits in praise.**

**O God, quiet our souls so we may listen.**

**We seek within our heart Your call on our lives.**

**O God, quiet our minds so we may ponder Your words.**

**We long to join together in person;**

**However, we know You are with all of us now.**

**O God, unite us together as one in worship of You.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Forgiving God, we confess that we struggle to forgive one another. We resist forgiveness, for holding a grudge seems easier. Vengeance is more tempting. However, You have forgiven us, and called us into the hard work of forgiving those who sin against us, in the ways we still sin against one another. Help us to hold ourselves accountable, to do right where we can, and to make the initial steps in seeking forgiveness and forgiving others. Help us to know we are not alone, and grant us the wisdom to know the resources that can help us in this journey. In the name of Christ, who forgives us all, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

The peace of Christ is with you. God knows you and loves you for who you truly are. God knows your heart, and that you long to do right. Trust in God’s ways and show mercy. Pursue peace, love, and forgiveness. You are not alone. You are loved and carried by God. Go and share the good news, loving and forgiving one another. Amen.

Prayer

Sojourning God, lead us into Your ways. Lead us into the paths of righteousness. Lead us to the places of still waters and green pastures, places of restoration. Lead us with Your staff that guides us through the valley of the shadow, and lead us to the table You have prepared for us. May we know that we are never alone, that You travel with us through all the difficulties of life, leading us on. In Your name we pray, Sojourning God. Amen.