Worship Resources for September 15, 2013—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28 or Exodus 32:7-14; Psalm 14 or Psalm 51:1-10; Luke 15:1-10; 1 Timothy 1:12-17

In our first thread of the Hebrew Scripture readings in this season after Pentecost, we have been following the theme of prophets who spoke out for God’s ways when it was not popular, putting their own lives at risk for God’s message. In Jeremiah 4, we read the judgment upon people who have given up wisdom from God and turned to their own foolishness. Verses 23-26 are sort of an “un-Creation” story, in which creation reverses itself, going back to a formless void, the birds have left the air, the light has left the heavens. As Jeremiah predicts what will happen to Judah in the upcoming siege and exile, the God of Israel, the God of Creation, will undo what was created—but not completely. We are reminded that the prophets always have a glimpse of hope. The end of verse 27 reads, “yet I will not make a full end.” There is still hope. Not all will be lost or undone.

Exodus 32:7-14 is from our second thread of the readings this season, in which the theme of God fulfilling the covenantal promises made with the people prevails. This is the familiar story of what happens after Moses receives the Ten Commandments—the people, under Aaron’s lead, have given up on God and Moses and are making a golden calf to follow as their God. Moses has to intervene and help God cool down, reminding God of the covenant that God made with Abraham and Sarah. God changes God’s mind about destroying them all, remembering the covenant to Abraham and Sarah and to their descendants forever. Like wedding vows, God will be their God, through good times and bad, and will never abandon them completely or destroy them. But it takes Moses reminding God of this, and Moses will not be the first or last prophet to do so.

Psalm 14 sings sadly of those who turn away from the wisdom of God to follow their own desires. They reject God and reject God’s ways, and never call upon God. Those who remain faithful to God, even through difficult times will know that God is good and that God will bring deliverance.

Psalm 51:1-10 is the opposite of Psalm 14: in this psalm, the singer acknowledges their own sin, their own turning away from God, and desires reconciliation and forgiveness and restoration. The singer famously asks for a new, clean heart, and a new and right spirit within them, to guide them on the path that leads to God.

Luke 15:1-10 contain the first two of three parables in this chapter—the most famous, the Parable of the Prodigal Son, is not included in the lectionary this time. But these first two parables of the Lost Sheep and the Lost Coin are also important. We are reminded of the context, that Jesus was eating with sinners, welcoming them, and that some of the religious leaders were complaining about it. In both of these parables, the protagonist pays attention to something that normally would be forgotten about soon after—a lost sheep, a lost coin. It would have been ridiculous to leave 99 sheep behind to go after one lost sheep. Losing just one was probably a miracle that you didn’t lose more. Same with losing a coin. If you lost a $100 bill but had 9 more of them, you might be a bit angry that you lost it, but you would get over it soon. You certainly wouldn’t be going out and inviting your neighbors to celebrate once you found it. What Jesus is doing is placing worth and value on what others had deemed worthless. People—human beings, their very lives—are valuable to God, every single one. And when society starts saying you’re worthless, you might start believing it—and ending up in addiction, depressed, and feeling completely useless to the world. But Jesus says “You are valuable—You are precious to God.” Jesus would rather leave the 99 who know who they are to find the one that has been rejected and left for dead. Jesus would rather spend all the time looking to find one who was lost than to forget and move on. People are more valuable than lost coins or even lost sheep.

1 Timothy 1:12-17 shares the writer’s own testimony. Most scholars believe this was not written by Paul but rather a later disciple of Paul’s. This passage is a beautiful statement of thanksgiving to Jesus who is the one who called the writer into this ministry, using him despite of, and because of, his faults and shortcomings to be a witness to God. The writer is grateful for God’s blessings, grace and mercy, and that because of God’s grace and mercy the writer is able to use his whole life as a witness of Jesus Christ and of Christ’s faith and love.

Each one of us is made in the image of God; therefore, each one of us is worthy. Though the world may end as Jeremiah shares (or as it seems, here in our world, nearing the brink of war once again), it will not all be undone. The one thing that cannot be undone in creation is the image of God that is in us. Because of that, we are valued. We are worthy. We belong to God. And God will seek us out to the ends of the earth as a lost sheep, into all the cracks and darkness and lonely, lost places as a lost coin. We are not forgotten to God, even when we fall into despair, into addiction, into hopelessness. We are not forgotten to God. We are worthy. We are valuable. We are of the utmost importance, and God not only has much use for us, but needs us.

Call to Worship

We come into this space with our voice

 **We come to sing praise to our God!**

We come into this space with our presence

 **We come to be united in fellowship with God!**

We come into this space with our breath

 **We come to give our being, our all, to God!**

For all we have and all we are, comes from our Creator

 **Who gives us new life in Jesus Christ our Lord!**

 **Come, let us celebrate as the new creation in Christ!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Loving God, we have at times believed the lie that we are worthless, that we have no value, that we are broken and damaged goods. We have at times believed the lie that we needed to do something to fix ourselves in order to be worthy of you, whether it be magic words, or a step-by-step process. Forgive our foolishness and remind us that You love us, completely as we are. You love us because You made us. We are Yours. Help us to remember this always, that while the world may break against us, we are not broken people. In You, we have wholeness, healing, and hope. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

There is no place you can go, nothing you can do, nothing on earth or in the entire universe that will separate you from the love of God. You are made in God’s image. Even when you can’t see it, God can. Embrace the love of God that is already embracing You, and share the Good News with others. Amen.

Prayer

Love, Light, Life—You, Creator of All, are all of these, and You give us Love, Light and Life. Help us to live out Your image reflected in us: to be creators ourselves of Love, Light and Life in this world. Turn us away from the temptation to only reflect the dark places around us, and instead help us to be the mirror of all Your goodness in the world. For the world cannot see without Your Light, and it cannot be Light without us. You came as Life, and the Life was the Light of the people as the Gospel tells us, and as the prophet Isaiah shares, we become Your light in this world. But most of all, You are Love, and that Love cannot be shared without our hands and feet, for we are the body of Christ. Help us to reflect Your Love, Light and Life in all that we are. Amen.