Worship Resources for September 16, 2012—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Proverbs 1:20-33 or Isaiah 50:4-9a; Psalm 19 or Psalm 116:1-9; Mark 8:27-38; James 3:1-12

Proverbs 1:20-33 is the first introduction of Wisdom personified as a woman. A few weeks ago we read from Proverbs 9, and again we hear Woman Wisdom cry out in the midst of the busy-ness of the world, in the hustle and bustle where we go from task to task without thought or care, where we forget God and the people of God just to get our own leg up in the world. Wisdom calls out to us to turn away from the ways of the world, where we are focused on the now and do not look to the future. Wisdom calls us to look at our whole lives, our ways of living, and to seek God’s Wisdom and insight, rather than the way of the world which is to live here and now, to forget other’s needs and focus on our wants and desires now. Wisdom reminds us that a life faithful to God requires both an inner and outer focus—an inner focus on leaving the ways of the world behind and trusting God’s Wisdom, and an outer focus on the needs of our neighbors and the life God desires for us, of love, justice and peace.

Isaiah’s third Suffering Servant Song portrays a servant who stands for God and God’s ways even through humiliation, pain and suffering. This song in chapter 50 is to inspire the remnant of Israel to stand firm in God’s ways, and that God will bring deliverance. While Christians have often interpreted these passages to be about Jesus, the experience of many of the prophets is found in these songs, for Jeremiah, Isaiah and others all suffered at the hands of those in power, the religious and ruling classes, the conquering empires, and even from the people. In contrast to the people, who often turned away from God, many of the prophets remained steadfast even through suffering, and we are reminded that we, too, are called to endure and remain faithful, for God is faithful. God does not cause suffering; God does not desire suffering. However, throughout our suffering, when we remain faithful and trust in God, we know God is present with us, and that we do not suffer alone.

Psalm 19 sings of the greatness of God in creation, and the call on our lives to follow God’s ways. God, who created the heavens and earth, also created the Law, the Way we ought to live—not a set of rules to follow, but a way of life that focuses on the desires of God and not the desires of the world. In the presence of Wisdom, we are reminded to turn inward, away from the ways of the world around us, to remember God guides our lives—and then turn outward, to live in the way of God in the world around us.

Psalm 116:1-9 praises God for deliverance from evil, from death. The psalmist reminds those that are faithful that God is faithful to them, even in times of suffering. God does not relieve the suffering while it is happening, but God is present, and when the time of suffering has passed, we are reminded that God did not abandon us—God is still with us, and will see us through when we endure and remain faithful.

Mark 8:27-38 is the familiar story in the Gospels where Jesus asks, “Who do you say that I am?” Peter answers triumphantly “You are the Messiah.” But in the next breath, when Jesus is telling the disciples about how the Son of Man will suffer, be rejected and killed, Peter tries to rebuke him. Peter clearly does not get who Jesus is or what Jesus is all about. We are called to die to the ways of this world. The ways of this world fear death, are all about satisfaction now, and are focused on one’s own salvation and success. The way of the cross is to die to all those things, and to live for God, which is to give one’s life over completely to God. And that involves living for others, looking to the needs of the poor, the outcast and the marginalized, and remembering that death does not have power over us—rather, God’s love endures forever, so we ought to endure and live for God, and not for ourselves. It is hard to understand and accept—even the disciples did not get it—but it is what we are called to do.

James 3:1-2 is a reminder of how dangerous we can be. With our mouths, our tongue, we can bless and curse. We can hurt others intentionally and unintentionally. James, writing in the Wisdom tradition, reminds us that first we must turn inward to God and away from the ways of the world—to seek God’s guidance, to think before we speak, to use our tongue, our words, to build up rather than to break down. We are reminded that a few weeks ago Jesus spoke about how it is what comes out of the mouth that is unclean, not what goes in—and so first we must turn inward to what is inside us, and then turn outward, to use our words to speak up for justice, to speak words of hope, to speak words of peace, to speak words of encouragement—and not to say things that make us feel better about ourselves, words that harm others. Most importantly, we must be careful not to use our words to represent the voice of God in ways that are for our own personal gain. We are called to bless instead of cursing, and often we can use the words of Scripture to curse rather than bless. We are called to bring life and light to the world, and our voice is our most powerful tool to do this, next to our hands. Our hands, our feet and words must be in congruence—we must do justice, love kindness, and walk humbly with our God, and our lives and words must match to do the work of God.

Consistency, congruency—this leads to authenticity. To be an authentic follower of Christ, we must match up our words and actions. We must remain faithful even in times of struggle. We must turn inward first to God before our words lead us astray—we must think before we speak. And we must remember that our lives and words are witnesses to Christ’s presence in our lives, and if we truly wish to walk with insight, to walk with Christ, we must remember that we can’t be focused on our own desires and need, but on the way of God, which is beyond ourselves and beyond our time.

Call to Worship:

Leader: The way of the world calls us to get a better job and make more money!

People: The way of Christ calls us to remember those in need around us.

Leader: The way of the world calls us to focus on the next step up the ladder of success!

People: The way of Christ calls us to seek God’s wisdom and guidance.

Leader: The way of the world calls us to turn away from those that would hold us back: the homeless, the beggars, the dirty children and the imprisoned.

People: The way of Christ calls us to reach out, to speak out, to stand up for God’s people and God’s justice.

Leader: Come away from the tempting voice of the world.

All: Come, let us walk in the ways of Wisdom, let us follow Jesus to the cross, to die to the ways of this world and to live for God and God’s people. Come, let us worship God.

Prayer of Confession:

Christ on the Cross, we pray for our broken world and our own brokenness. We seek forgiveness for where we have failed one another, for where we have turned our backs and focused on ourselves. We seek forgiveness for the times we have been quick to criticize and condemn instead of listening and speaking with compassion. We seek forgiveness for the times we have intentionally and unintentionally hurt others for our own gain. Call us away from the voice of the world to hear Your Wisdom, to seek Your insight, and to remember Your commandments to love our neighbor as ourselves. Help us to journey to the Cross with you, to die to the ways of the world and to live for You. In Your name we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon (from James 5):

Pray for one another, so that you might be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. Come away from your wandering and pray for those in the way of the world, and come and live into the way of Christ. You are forgiven, renewed and restored. Amen.

Prayer:

God of Steadfast Love, we come to You in need of encouragement. At times we are brought down by the news of the world, and all we can do is focus on ourselves. Call us away from the temptation to focus on our own lives, and instead, help us to remember the poor and the outcast among us. Remind us of Your call on our lives to love our neighbor as ourselves, and in doing this, we live out our love for You. Call us to do our part to bring about your reign on earth. When we feel discouraged, Lord, lift us up. When we feel downhearted, God, fill our hearts with love. When we feel despair, loving Christ, fill us with hope. Send us forth with Your courage, Your love, and Your hope. In the name of Christ, the God of Love, we pray. Amen.