Worship Resources for September 17th—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: Binding of Isaac, Genesis 21:1-3; 22:1-14 (John 1:29)

The people walk across dry land as Moses stretches out his hand in Exodus 14:19-31. Though Pharaoh’s army pursues them, the army is thrown into a panic as their chariots get stuck in the mud. God appears as a pillar of fire and cloud, an ominous sign against the Egyptian army, and some want to turn back. However, God calls Moses to stretch out his hand again, and the sea returned to its normal depth, drowning the army of the Egyptians. God saved Israel that day, and the people of Israel saw the great work God had done for them, and believed in God and trusted Moses.

Psalm 114 sings of how even the earth trembles before God, the sea fled, the mountains skipped, because God is the one who brings forth water from rocks. God is the one who brings forth pools of water where there is none. God created the world, but also makes the impossible happen, just as God made the people of Israel leave slavery in Egypt.

Exodus 15:1b-11, 20-21 is a song celebrating Israel’s victory over Egypt, celebrating their escape from slavery to freedom while their enemies perished in the Red Sea. In this song, God is seen as part of creation—a blast from God’s nostrils brought the water flooding. God is found in creation, working for the liberation of the people of Israel. The singer praises God that there is no other God like them. The final two verses declare that Miriam, Moses and Aaron’s sister, also took a tambourine in her hand and the women went out dancing, praising God that the enemy’s horses and riders were taken into the sea.

Genesis 50:15-21 takes us back in the narrative of the people of Israel to before they became slaves, from the time when they settled in Egypt as part of the great family of Jacob. In this passage, Joseph, who was sold into slavery by his brothers, forgives them for what they have done, because despite what he has gone through, God has still brought goodness upon them. Though they intended harm, God intends goodness, and Joseph is able to see the intended goodness of God that still shone through, and forgives his brothers.

Psalm 103 is a song of blessing and praise for God who is like a father to the people. God has compassion on those who stand in awe of God. For God is the one who is slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love, mercy, and compassion. God does not pay us back for all our sins, but rather “deals” with us in love. The psalmist calls upon the congregation to bless God because God is merciful and loves us despite our flaws and shortcomings, just like a parent loves their child and provides instruction to improve their child’s life.

As Paul draws near the end of his letter to the church in Rome, he addresses concerns that may come up between Jewish and Gentile believers. For Paul, coming from a Jewish background, there is only one God. So the meat offered and sacrificed to idols means nothing to him; it is just meat. But to the Gentile converts who once worshipped those idols, that meat sacrificed in the pagan temples is an abomination. In the same manner, the Jewish Christians were used to the Sabbath day as the last day of the week, but to the Gentiles, rising early on the first day of the week paid homage to Christ’s resurrection, and also was part of the cultural custom of revering the first day of the week. Paul writes to the church in Rome and urges them to be welcoming of these differences. They ought to live for others, not for themselves, and not become stumbling blocks. They need to not judge others, for each of them will be accountable to God.

Peter wonders where the “out” is in having to forgive someone, but Jesus doesn’t give him an out. When Peter asks how often he has to forgive a member of the church, Jesus tells him not seven but seventy-seven times. But it’s not about the numbers. Jesus tells a parable of a slave who owed a lot of money to a king, begged for mercy and the king gave it to him—only to find out that the slave was unwilling to forgive the debts of someone indebted to him. And we are left with the harsh words that the slave was handed over to be tortured until his debt was paid, and that the same will happen to us if we don’t forgive others from our heart. However, we need to be clear that the debt was the same kind of debt—the slave asked for forgiveness for the same thing the one indebted to him was doing, but refused to offer forgiveness to the one indebted to him. We are not called to blindly forgive others, especially those who are abusive. Rather, we are called to forgive others who do the same thing we continue to do. Because if we can’t forgive them we are hypocrites.

The Narrative Lectionary jumps from Creation last week to the Binding of Isaac this week in Genesis 21:1-3 and 22:1-14. The first three verses share how God fulfilled the promise to Abraham and Sarah through the birth of their son Isaac in their old age. And then God tested Abraham, asking him to bring his only son to be sacrificed on the mountain of Moriah. Abraham appears to trust God in this story, that God will provide the lamb for the sacrifice, but it isn’t until Abraham pulls out the knife to kill his son that God stops him. Child sacrifice was a common practice in those days, and it is in this moment that God reveals this is not God’s way. Instead, a ram is provided to be a sacrifice. God is showing that the way of worship will be different. God does not require human sacrifice or death. Rather, God desires to fulfill the promises of life.

John the Baptist, in John 1:29, declares that Jesus is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world. Jesus lives his life in faithfulness to God and gives it up as a sacrifice to lay down his life for his friends (15:13).

What does God require of us? The great question asked in Micah 6:8 is answered not by sacrifice of people or animals, but in how we live our lives. God calls upon us to be in awe, to recognize that the same God who created all of the earth is the God who liberates us, who brings us into life. Through Jesus, we are called to forgive others because if we don’t, we’re hypocrites. We have to forgive others who do the same thing we continue to do. In the same manner, Paul reminds us that often the little things that divide us are not nearly as important as the common love for Christ Jesus. How we live our lives matters. Live your life by the example of Christ, laying down your life for the life of others, forgiving others as you are forgiven, and you will live well.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 103:1-4)

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and all that is within me:

 **Bless God’s holy name.**

Bless the Lord, O my soul, and do not forget what God has done for us;

 **Bless God’s holy name.**

God is the one who forgives us, who heals and restores us;

 **Bless God’s holy name.**

God crowns us with steadfast love and mercy,

 **Bless God’s holy name.**

Come, join our hearts in worship, in prayer and praise,

 **And may we bless God’s holy name.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Mercy and Justice, we confess that we do not forgive well. We want to be forgiven when we have done wrong, but want others to suffer the consequences when they do wrong. We want to be the executors of justice, but not face justice ourselves. Forgive us for our sins, and help us to forgive those who sin against us. Keep us from sin by reminding us of Your ways of love, and that when we lay down our lives for others, we are living for You. Call us away from our own greed and selfishness to care for others, to seek forgiveness where we have done wrong, and to offer forgiveness when we can to those who have wronged us. Help us to live as Christ lived. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

God loves us with a love that never ceases. God’s forgiveness is beyond all measure. Know that You are beloved by God, and God has forgiven you. Go, share the Good News by forgiving others, ending grudges, letting go of bitterness, and receive the fullness of life in Christ Jesus our Lord. Amen.

Prayer

Creator God, You have given us this wondrous earth whose beauty surpasses our imagination. At the same time, You have given us this powerful earth with storms and earthquakes that wreck havoc in our lives and destroy us. Though the chaos of the world is often out of our control, hold us accountable to reduce the harm we have caused to Your creation, through fracking and pollution and careless waste. Guide us in ways that bring healing to this earth, that bring restoration to its resources, that bring justice to those communities and peoples who have suffered the most at the hands of greed. Help us to be repairers of the breach, restorers of Your creation. Great Creator, we pray all things in Your Name. Amen.