Worship Resources for September 20th—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Proverbs 31:10-31 or Jeremiah 11:18-20; Psalm 1 or Psalm 54; James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a; Mark 9:30-37

Narrative Lectionary: Isaac Born to Sarah, Genesis 18:1-15, 21:1-7 (Mark 10:27)

In our Wisdom thread, we read a passage from the end of Proverbs referred to as “The Capable Wife.” [Rachel Held Evans has written extensively about this “Woman of Valor” and I encourage you to read this and other blog posts she has written](http://rachelheldevans.com/blog/3-things-you-might-not-know-about-proverbs-31?rq=Woman%20of%20Valor). All too often, we have read this passage as “The Ideal Woman” and feel like we are failures if we cannot live up to all she does. Or, we have rejected this passage as a mark against feminism. We have missed the point with both interpretations and not understanding the poetry of the writer in praising this woman.

Our Prophets thread turns to Jeremiah, who gives a very human response to what has happened to him as the prophet of God. He has been ridiculed, imprisoned, defamed and betrayed by those who should have listened to him. Jeremiah hopes to see God execute retribution for the shame and harm he has experienced in speaking God’s word to the leadership and the people. Jeremiah has committed himself to the call of God to be God’s prophet, and his very human response is that he wants to see justification for what he has gone through, that he is on the right side.

Psalm 1 speaks of the wisdom of following God’s ways. If one is rooted in God like the trees are rooted, when strong winds come, they stand firm. In God’s ways, we are watered, nourished, and bear fruit, rather than being tossed about by the ways of the world.

Psalm 54 is a prayer for deliverance from one’s enemies. Like the Jeremiah passage, the psalmist hopes to see his enemies “repaid” for their evil. The psalmist wants justification for what they have gone through, in the name of God. Both of these passages reflect human responses for retribution, which is not the same as justice.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a speaks of the desire to draw closer to God. If we seek the wisdom of God, our desires follow God’s desires; our intention aligns with God’s intentions for us. Wisdom helps us to bear the fruits of the spirit, and when we sow peace, we create peace.

Mark 9:30-37 is the story of the disciples arguing about who was the greatest, just after Jesus told them he will be betrayed and killed. The disciples represent the best and worst of us human beings: they leave everything to follow Jesus, but yet they have not left the ways of the world. They are unwilling to give up their own desires for power and greatness. They are afraid to ask Jesus what it really means to follow him. Jesus teaches them that they must become like children, who are still often in today’s society seen as least of all, less important than adults—we are called to become like them. With the powerful images of Syrian refugees still on our mind, what does it mean to become like a little child? What does it mean to welcome a little child?

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the birth of Isaac, promised by God and prophesied by the three strangers Abraham welcomed in Genesis 18. Sarah didn’t think it was possible and laughed about it, then denied laughing about it—so when Isaac was finally born, in chapter 21, he is named “Laughter.” As the Mark verse states “With God all things are possible.” Sometimes God can even make us laugh at ourselves, when we doubt, when we think it won’t happen, when we cannot be optimistic any longer. Sometimes we end up laughing at ourselves.

The birth of Isaac, and Jesus taking a small child remind us not only that children are important, they are essential. Sometimes we say that children are our future. We need to recognize that children are important now. The lives of those little children, the drowned refugees of Sudan, are essential. Their stories are essential. And when we lose one of these children, we are losing something of ourselves. War and famine occur when we make other things more important—when we seek our own satisfaction, material wealth and power over the needs of others. Children are the ones who suffer. When we seek God’s wisdom, God’s intention for us, we care for the needs of others, and we love our neighbors as ourselves.

Call to Worship

Join in the dance, feel the rhythm, hear the call:

 **God is calling us into the movement towards eternal life.**

Sing praises to God, lift up your voices and clap your hands:

 **The joy of God is found in the love of Christ Jesus.**

Come, join in this time of worship, of prayer and praise and singing:

 **For God is worthy of our love and praise.**

 **God is the one who leads us to New Life. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Loving Jesus, we confess that our hearts are broken. We have failed the children of our world. We have failed the war orphans and refugees. We have failed the hungry and the sick. We have failed the poor. We have failed to welcome children as You called us to do. We have forgotten that we are all Your children, and that we were once as small and fragile. Forgive us. Move us to compassion. Stir in us the call to justice for all little ones. May we build a better world, now and for Your kingdom to come, on earth as it is in heaven. May we embrace the children of the world as You have embraced us. In the name of Christ, who was born an infant among the animals so long ago, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Like a child, our spirits can be renewed. Like a child, we can heal and mend from bumps and bruises. Like a child, we can be taught, and we can learn. Lean into God’s wisdom: remember the teachings of old, to love your neighbor as yourself. Remember to seek their well-being and to learn their needs. Remember that the world does not revolve around you, but we are all revolving together. Join in the rhythm. Find your pace, and help move the world to justice. Amen.

(I confess my final offering for resources this Sunday is a little bit more edgy than I usually write. Kudos to those of you with the courage to use this prayer for this Sunday).

Prayer

Almighty God, move us from complacency to compassion. Help us to get off of our butts. There is work to be done and we are tired. But we also know that if we do not do the work of justice, we are not living by example for our children. Instead, we often look to our own comfort and well-being. We don’t always desire to be the greatest, but God, sometimes we desire to have enough and be content and not have to work so hard. As the Scripture says, help us to gird up our loins—or put on our big-kid underwear—and get back to work in the world, as best as we can. Help us to encourage one another when we are discouraged. Challenge us to answer Your call for justice. In the name of Christ, who got up and went to the cross, and who got up on the third day to live again, we pray. Amen.