Worship Resources for September 21st, 2014—Fifteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 16:2-15 or Jonah 3:10-4:11; Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 or Psalm 145:1-8; Philippians 1:21-30; Matthew 20:1-16

Narrative Lectionary: Joseph in Prison, Genesis 39:1-23 (Matthew 5:11-12)

“When it rains, it pours.” So it was with the Israelites in this chapter of Exodus. They had just left slavery behind, crossed the Red Sea into freedom, celebrated on the shores God’s deliverance—and in the next moment, complained about having nothing to eat. They remember the bread that they used to eat in Egypt, and God tells Moses that it will now rain down bread—manna, to be exact. It wasn’t what they were used to—in fact, they had no idea what it was at first—but it filled their daily needs and gave the enough for each day, including the Sabbath. They went from complaining about having nothing, to having manna covering the ground for them to gather and eat.

God’s mind is changed in this second thread of the Hebrew Scriptures, and the prophet Jonah is angry about it. Jonah is angry because he looks like a fool, because he put in all this work and effort—even tried to run away from God at first—but God did not bring destruction down on Ninevah. God’s desire is not punishment, but restoration. God desires to forgive, to redeem, to restore. God is not punitive, and God’s justice is about restoration. This makes Jonah very upset and angry. He wants people to get what they deserve, never mind that he himself ran away from what God was calling him to do. But God desires healing and wholeness, mercy and kindness.

Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45 sings of God’s deeds through history, and the latter verses sing of what God provided to the people, quail and manna. There is no mention of the people’s grumbling, only of God’s faithfulness to provide for the people in the wilderness. God hears the people’s cries and provides, and the people are called upon to remember what God has done for them.

Psalm 145:1-8 celebrates God’s goodness and greatness, and the people are called upon to pass along the stories of God’s faithfulness, generation to generation. They should sing and proclaim what God has done, and remember God’s greatness, God’s mercy and restoration.

Philippians 1:21-30 contains part of Paul’s discourse from prison. Paul does not know what is going to come next, and he boldly declares that to live is Christ, and to die is gain. To live—Paul will live for Christ, and therefore live for others and continue to do the good works of the Gospel and proclaim Jesus the Christ. If he dies in prison, then he knows he will be in the kingdom of Christ. Because of this conviction, he is not afraid of death, he is not afraid of what will happen to him in prison, and he boldly declares his faith to encourage the Philippians in their ministry and mission.

Matthew 20:1-16 is the parable of the landowner who went to look for workers for his field. The parable shows us that our worldly ways are not the ways of God. In the culture around Jesus, and much to our chagrin, much of the culture of the church today—those who have been invested the longest should get rewarded. Those who have been faithful their whole life should be exalted above those who only changed their lives at the end. But that is not how God works. Rather, we all share in the same joy of living for Christ and loving others. It is about what we do for God together, not about rewards. The last shall be first and the first shall be last in the kingdom of God. In the kingdom of God, there are no worldly rewards, but we rejoice together that our reward is Christ.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Joseph in Prison in Genesis 39:1-23. Through all of Joseph’s trials and ordeals, including being sold into slavery, he never once questions God. He never denies God’s presence is with him. He still reveres God and looks to God for wisdom, guidance and discernment, even when put into prison for a crime he did not commit, even when he is forgotten in prison. God’s faithfulness endures forever, even when worldly justice and human love fail us. God does not give up on us, so we ought not to give up on God.

Matthew 5:11-12 contains words of comfort from Jesus to endure through persecution. Rejoice when they persecute you! Be glad, for your reward is great in heaven! But remember—heavenly rewards are not the same as worldly rewards. There is no special place to sit when you have suffered. The heavenly reward is God’s love, which is available for all. But the reward is worth it. Knowing that you have stayed true to God’s love, and God’s love is with you—this is worth it. Jesus knows, for Jesus died a common criminal’s death. Where is the glory in that? There is no worldly glory in that, just a tomb with a stone rolled in front. But the heavenly reward is eternal life, and the eternal love of God with us.

The way the world works, the way the world rewards, the way we complain and demand change—none of this works in the kingdom of heaven, in the reign of God. Instead, God’s steadfast love endures forever, and this is greater than any worldly reward. God’s desire is not punishment for bad behavior or rewarding for good behavior—God’s desire is for us to love God and to love our neighbor as ourselves. With this comes mercy, compassion, justice that restores, healing and hope. This is the way of God, not the way of our world. The first shall be last, and the last shall be first. In other words, everything is turned upside down in the reign of God, and it is best for us to start practicing that now.

Call to Worship

We gather here to worship God;

 **Guide our minds to focus on You, O Christ.**

We gather here to follow Jesus;

 **Guide our actions, that they might fulfill Your commandments, O Christ.**

We gather here to serve God;

 **Open our hearts, that we might be filled with Your love and compassion, O Christ.**

 **Come, let us worship, let us follow, let us serve our Savior, Christ the Lord. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Author of Salvation, we confess that in writing our story we have written others out. We have put ourselves first and ignored the needs of others. We have sought worldly success and fame, and forgotten Your commandment to love our neighbors as ourselves, to become servant of all by becoming least. Call us into Your story, in which love wins, the hungry are filled with good things, and justice, peace and mercy prevail. In Your Name, Jesus the Christ, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

Love Wins! Peace Wins! Hope Wins! Christ is Risen, life triumphs over death. Christ has written you into the Book of Life. You are loved. You are worthy. You are forgiven. You are restored. Share the Good News by loving and serving all. Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, guide us away from the ways of the world to hear Your call and follow You. Guide us away from the temptations to put ourselves first and see that we are the body of Christ, that we need each other. We all have different abilities and gifts, and all of us are necessary for the building up of your reign on earth as it is in heaven. Help us to see that we need others, that we cannot go this alone, and that You desire for us to reach out in love to all. May our hearts be open to Your desire for all of us, that we may be one, as You and Christ are one. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.

International Day of Prayer for Peace (World Council of Churches)

God of Peace,

May we live with peace in our hearts

May we live with peace in our homes

May we be bearers of peace to our neighborhood and community.

May we be builders of peace in our nation.

May we seek peace and pursue it[[1]](#footnote-1)

In all we say and do.

We pray for peace in every nation,

In every city and village,

In every neighborhood.

May we begin by living in peace with each other,

May we covenant that, as far as it depends on us[[2]](#footnote-2)

May we live in peace.

Prince of Peace,

We cannot pray for peace without justice

We cannot pray for peace without mercy

We cannot pray for peace without love.

May we seek justice that restores;

May we seek justice for the oppressed,

For all who are on the margins.

May we grant mercy as You have given us mercy,

May we forgive as we have been forgiven,

May we see each other’s humanity;

May we see the face of Christ in each other.

May we love our neighbor as ourselves.

May we love others as Christ loves us.

May we welcome strangers as friends.

Spirit of Peace,

Descend upon us, mold our hearts

To be full of your love.

May we seek peace and pursue it.

May we strive for peace in all we do.

May we be peacemakers.

May we build up the reign of God

On earth, as it is in heaven.

May we bring peace in all we do.

May we speak peace in all we say.

May we be peace to each other.

In the name of our God

Who covenants with us in the name of peace.

In the name of Christ

Who is the Prince of Peace.

In the name of the Spirit,

Who breathes into us peace.

May we be peace.

Amen.

1. Psalm 34:14 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Romans 12:18 [↑](#footnote-ref-2)