Worship Resources for September 22nd—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 8:18-9:1 or Amos 8:4-7; Psalm 79:1-9 or Psalm 113; Luke 16:1-13; 1 Timothy 2:1-7

We sing the hymn, “There is a balm in Gilead,” reminding us of how God does see us through the troubled times, but the passage from Jeremiah also reminds us of what it is like to be in that darkest valley. Jeremiah grieves for what will happen to his people, and in this moment cannot see the other side. This passage was also the passage for September 23, 2001, after 9/11/01. It is hard to see in that darkest of times and places that there is any light. Sometimes we are too quick to move to the other side, sometimes we stay too long in that dark place. We need to acknowledge that there are times and places we need to grieve, and we need to be able to mourn what has been lost before we can begin to turn and see the light of the other side.

The passage from Amos is a word of warning for those who have left the concerns of the poor behind under the disguise of religious values. In Amos’ day, many of the wealthy elite ruling class were worshipping other gods and having lavish feasts to celebrate the harvest and other seasons, and were taking from the poor to finance these festivals. Amos warns that the people have forgotten the God of creation who does not desire these festivals but rather desires justice for all people. This God has not forgotten the poor and the downtrodden, though the wealthy have. Right worship of God and just treatment of all people go hand in hand with the prophets—forgetting the poor is forgetting the commandments of God.

Psalm 79:1-9 is a plea for deliverance from those who are facing the siege of Jerusalem. In this case, the psalmist speaks against the invading peoples and the nations around them, and asking for forgiveness where their own people have gone wrong. The psalmist pleads for God to remember with compassion that the people of Israel belong to God, and therefore it is God’s responsibility to deliver them.

Psalm 113 praises the God who lifts up the poor. Almost like an antidote to the message in the reading from Amos, this psalm remembers that God is the one who lifts up the poor and the needy and that God will come to deliver them. God will raise up all those who have been trampled upon and have been under the weight of injustice.

Luke 16:1-13 is a strange parable of Jesus. This “dishonest manager” has charges brought against him and it’s not clear if they were true or false, but the manager, who is too ashamed to beg and not strong enough to dig, starts making friends by settling the bills of customers of his master for less than what they owe—so that way when he is out of a job, he has connections of where to go. Jesus uses this as an example of being faithful. Have you used what was given you to do the work of God, or have you used it for yourself? It’s a strange parable—we’re supposed to look at the manager’s response, not the fact that he did this shrewdly and cheated his master out of what was given him—but the fact that he used what resources he had to make friends is how we ought to be faithful with what God gives us—use what we have to do good works and to help those in need, rather than being concerned about pleasing the powers that be. Jesus wraps it up with “You cannot serve God and wealth.” It’s not about saving for one’s self and storing up treasures here, but using the gifts we have to further God’s work. It’s not a perfect parable, but it is an example of being faithful with what God has given us to share the Good News with others.

1 Timothy 2:1-7 reminds us of the importance of prayer and to pray for our leaders. In the past few weeks as we have watched the world near the edge of war, and then suddenly leaders looking to other non-violent resolutions to ending the conflict, we have seen the impact of prayer. In my own circles, I have seen conservatives and liberals, Christians and Jews and Muslims and others all praying for a different way to react to the violence in Syria, and I believe that prayer has made other options possible. We are reminded of the importance to pray for all people, and especially those who have power and influence, who make decisions that affect everyday people. We ought to always be in prayer for our leaders.

Sometimes it can seem like the world is against us. We feel pressure from all places—from family, from bosses and supervisors, from governing officials—from the world’s problems. We can be in a dark place, a deep valley, with no end in sight. It can seem that there is no balm in Gilead. And others may be trying to pull us along, out of depression, out of hopelessness, out of despair—but we need time to grieve before we can move. Sometimes we have to try to see in the dark first before we can see the light. But we remember that it is God who leads us through, God who is with us, God who we follow from darkness to light. And Jesus is the light of the world. It is Jesus that we serve, not our bosses, not our leaders, not the ways of the world.

Call to Worship (from 1 Timothy 2:3-6)

What is right and true of God our Savior?

**That God desires all to have the knowledge of truth.**

There is one God,

**There is one Christ Jesus.**

Both human and divine,

**Who came for us all.**

We know this, and we believe.

**We walk with faith and with hope, and the truth that Christ has set us free.**

**Come into this time of worship, as we journey towards the truth and light of Christ.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of Mercy, we come to You with our broken promises and failed dreams, with the betrayal and injustice that has happened to us. Tenderly help us to heal, to be knit back together, to feel Your love surround us and make us whole again. Lift us up, encourage us, and gently lead us out of darkness into Your marvelous light. In the name of Christ, who is the Light of the World, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God desires wholeness and healing for all of us. God is the God of Creation, of Life: we are offered new life and new hope in Christ Jesus. Go with this good news: you are not broken. You are not flawed. You are not a failure. You are a promise of hope to the world, and God has made you new. God loves you. Amen.

Prayer

Shepherding God, lead us through the dark times gently. Do not allow the darkness to overwhelm us, but guide us through the rough places. Remind us not to lash out in anger when we stumble; forgive us if we cause another to stumble as well. Carry us gently when we need to remain in the darkness, but move us towards the light. Give us rest on this journey, for as much joy as there is in life, there is pain and sorrow, and at times we simply need to breathe. Always, always, remind us of Your love and grace when our hearts are tender from mourning. In the name of Christ, who went to the cross of darkness and rose into the light of the resurrection, we pray all things. Amen.