Worship Resources for Sunday, September 23rd, 2012—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Observing International Peace Day September 21st—Peace Sunday, September 23rd

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

Resources for International Peace Sunday: <http://www.bpfna.org/peacesunday2012#Litanies>

Suggested Scripture Reading for Peace Sunday: Luke 1:68-79

We have been following the theme of Wisdom in the Hebrew Scriptures, personified as a woman, and today we end selections from Proverbs with a poem often translated in English as “the Capable Wife.” However, as Rachel Held Evans often shares (and has a book coming out soon *A Year of Biblical Womanhood)* a better translation of the Hebrew is “A Woman of Valor.” This is not a to-do list, but rather a poem of praise for one’s wife, a woman who personifies Wisdom in her own life with her decisions and leadership. This is not a description to compare every woman to, but a reminder that all women do incredible things are live out God’s wisdom in their lives. This end to Proverbs celebrates God’s Wisdom in the most incredible way of all: in our very lives. So often we are taught Biblical examples of men who model God’s ways; Proverbs reminds us that God works through wonderful women and men, and that our image of God can be personified in both masculine and feminine terms. God is both and beyond.

Jeremiah 11:18-20 is a strange, short passage in our prophetic line of the lectionary readings. Last week we read from part of the Suffering Servant passages in Isaiah; this week, it is the prophet Jeremiah who himself suffers and calls out to God. Jeremiah is committed to God and desires for his life to be a witness; therefore, he also calls God to show those that have wronged him that they have gone astray. We desire judgment against others who wronged us, but we must always remember that God desires justice. God’s justice is a restorative justice, not a retributive justice. The consequences of our actions may cause us harm, even death; but God’s desire is for us to turn away, to repent, and to seek God. God desires reconciliation, healing and wholeness, not death—but God does not prevent death and destruction from happening, and when our actions have severe consequences, we may suffer as a result of them. But God does not desire this.

Psalm 1 reminds us that we have a choice—a choice to follow God’s ways, laid out for us in the law of God—a law that is not meant to bind us by rules but to guide us into a way of life—or we can reject God’s ways and follow the way of the wicked. We can go our own way and follow our own desires, and they will lead us to an empty end, but God’s ways lead us to life, a fulfilling, fruitful life.

Psalm 54 is a prayer for remembrance, that for those who remain faithful to God, God will remain faithful to them. Just like the prophet Jeremiah, we are reminded that in our suffering we can be a witness when we remain faithful to God, knowing that God did not cause our suffering. Sometimes suffering is a consequence of our own actions; sometimes it is the result of other’s actions against us, but we can only control our own reaction, and if we remain faithful to God, we will know God’s deliverance.

Mark 9:30-37 is another account of a time when Jesus tried to explain what would happen to him to his disciples, about his rejection, death and resurrection—and again, the disciples did not get it. This time, they were arguing about who was greater than the other, who was first—and Jesus reminds them that whoever wishes to be first must be last of all and servant of all. Jesus goes a step further—he takes a child and places it among them and tells the disciples (while embracing this child) that whoever welcomes a child in his name welcomes him, and whoever welcomes him welcomes the one who sent him. Children are powerless. Children are diverse—they can be quiet and contemplative as well as loud and obnoxious. But children look to others for love, and give love freely, and we must become like children, and we must welcome children and welcome one another, with all of our diversity of personalities and gifts.

James 3:13-4:3, 7-8a reminds us that there are two kinds of wisdom: the wisdom of the world says think about yourself, get rich, succeed, and put yourself first. The Wisdom of God calls us to follow God’s ways, to love our neighbor as ourselves, to lay down our lives for one another, to welcome children and strangers and care for the poor and those in need. The Wisdom of God calls us to remember what God has done in history and in our lives, and that we are called to live out God’s love in the world. As James 4:4 reminds us, friendship with the world—in other words, getting cozy with the way of the world—is contrary to the Gospel. The Gospel calls us to live in the world, but not be of the world. We are called to bring transformation to the world, light to the darkness.

I suggest Luke 1:68-79 as an alternative for Peace Sunday. The Song of Zechariah sings of the promise of a Messiah and of the prophet John, but also sings of hope for all of us, “to guide our feet into the way of peace.” The Light of the World, the message of God in Jesus the Christ, breaks forth in our lives, guiding us in the ways of peace. In the midst of all the turmoil of our world as of late—bitter political struggles, Syria, Lybia, Egypt, Israel and Iran, Congo, South Sudan, and the list goes on and on—there is still hope, just as there was hope in the time of Jesus’ birth as the Roman Empire was crushing down. God’s hope lives in us, when we are guided by God’s ways of wisdom and light. We can model Christ’s peace to the world.

God’s Wisdom is alive in the Scriptures and lives on in us, when we turn away from the selfish ways of the world to walk in the ways of Christ, who tied a towel around his waist and washed his disciples’ feet; who sat with the poor and the sinners and the tax collectors and the prostitutes; who used a child as an example of how his disciples ought to be. When we turn away from the ways of the world and follow the Wisdom of God, we model Christ’s love, and the path of peace.

Call to Worship

Leader: The wolf shall live with the lamb, the calf shall lie down with the lion

People: And a little child shall lead them.

Leader: Light shall shine in the darkness, the dawn from on high will break upon us

People: And a little child shall lead us.

Leader: The last shall be first, and the first will be last of all and servant of all

People: And we must become like a child.

Leader: Let us follow the Wisdom of God, which seems foolish to the world.

People: Let us follow the Prince of Peace, who guides our feet, our hands and our hearts.

All: Let us worship together.

Prayer of Confession

Prince of Peace, we come to You knowing that we have not followed in Your footsteps. We have allowed anger to become bitterness; we have replaced judgment for justice; we have sought retribution instead of restoration. Forgive us for following the ways of the world and not staying true to You. Forgive us for giving in to the desires of the world that feed anger and jealousy, rage and revenge. Call us back to Your path of peace, to love and seek to forgive, to hope and seek to restore. In the name of Christ, who calls the peacemakers blessed, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

God Forgives, God Heals and God Restores. God Loves, God Hopes and God Waits. Know that there is no place too far, no darkness too deep, where God cannot find us. God forgives us, loves us, and gives us the hope of new life now in Christ Jesus. Amen.

Prayer

Hope of the World, we call upon You to guide us in Your Wisdom. Guide us away from the ways of the world to seek a deeper, fuller relationship with You, where the ways of justice and peace become second-nature, where revenge and hate fade away. We join in solidarity with our brothers and sisters in war-torn lands near and far. We join in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who live on the streets of our communities. We join in solidarity with our brothers and sisters who suffer violence in silence in their homes and schools. Call upon us, O God, to speak out against bullying, domestic violence, and gang violence. Call upon us, O God, to work within our churches, schools and communities to end and prevent violence. Call upon us, O God, to speak out to our nation’s leaders and across the world to end violence and war. Call upon us, O God, to help veterans who come home with lack of services and care. Call upon us, O God, to do our part to live into the ways of peace. In the name of Christ Jesus we pray. Amen.