Worship Resources for September 23, 2018—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

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

A woman of valor! Rachel Held Evans, in her book *A Year of Biblical Womanhood*, explores this passage in Proverbs, part of the Wisdom writings. Sometimes in more progressive traditions we have looked down at this passage, not understanding the context. This passage uplifts the role of women in the society of that time, a woman who is in charge and runs her household. This is a woman who makes choices for herself and her household and doesn’t look back—not a woman who does everything, but a woman who does things wisely!

Psalm 1 reminds us that those who set their hearts on God, who meditate on the scriptures, the laws and the statutes, are like trees with deep roots, planted by streams. They will be continuously fed and will be strong, and their leaves will not wither. Those who are not rooted, who are blown about by every movement, will lose their leaves in the wind. God watches over those who live into God’s ways, but those who do not live into God’s ways will follow the path to death.

The prophet Jeremiah knows that the leaders are scheming against someone, but he laments when he learns that he is the target of their plot in 11:18-20. Though Jeremiah feels like a lamb led to slaughter, he remains faithful to God, committed to the cause, and knows that God will see him through.

Psalm 54 is a prayer for deliverance from one’s enemies. The psalmist pleas with God to be vindicated against those who have brought them harm. God is the one who brings deliverance and will bring vengeance; that is not ours to seek.

The Epistle reading continues in James with 3:13-4:3. Our conflicts and quarrels come from desiring what others have, but wisdom from God brings gentleness and kindness. If this desire for other things comes from within, then we must seek God’s wisdom in order to have peace within ourselves. If we draw near to God, we will find God is very near us.

When the disciples argued over who would be greatest in Mark 9:30-37, Jesus overheard them. They didn’t know what to make of Jesus talking about how he would be betrayed, killed, and then rise again; instead, they began to argue amongst themselves over worldly ideas of being first. Jesus declares that whoever wishes to be first must become last of all and servant of all. When Jesus takes a child and places it among them, it was shocking and scandalous—because children died all the time. Children weren’t really seen as important until they became of age to work and marry. But here, Jesus says that whoever welcomes a child welcomes him, and the one who sent him.

The Narrative Lectionary follows a theme of God’s covenant and faithfulness. In Genesis 39, Joseph, the second youngest son of Jacob, was sold into slavery by his brothers, ended up in Egypt, found himself in the house of Potiphar and then wrongly accused of assaulting Potiphar’s wife. He was thrown into prison, but even in prison, Joseph did the right thing, and was noticed by the chief jailer and given authority by him. Though all these horrible things happened to him, Joseph never gave up hope in God’s faithfulness, and he knew God’s blessings even in prison, accused of a crime he did not commit.

In Matthew 5:11-12, part of the Beatitudes, Jesus declares a blessing for those who are persecuted, falsely accused and reviled. Jesus blesses them because that is exactly what happened to the prophets before them. Even when the world turns its back, for those who remain faithful to God, God is with them. “Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven,” Jesus pronounces, echoing the psalmists, who believed that vengeance belonged to God.

The ways of the world are not God’s ways. The song “Rejoice” by U2 declares, “I can’t change the world, but I can change the world in me, if I rejoice.” James calls us to change from within, to set aside our desires and to seek God’s wisdom, in order to sow peace within ourselves. Jesus calls upon the disciples to seek the reign of God rather than the ways of the world, to become last of all and servant of all. Sometimes, the injustice in the world is too great to bear. We can’t change others, but we can change ourselves, and know that God’s faithfulness endures forever. Sometimes our version of justice includes vindication, right now. We want that “Aha, I was right and you were wrong!” moment. But it doesn’t often come in our lifetime. Instead, we know that we right with God, and that’s what matters in the long run. Vindication will come from God in the time to come, but love, wisdom, and righteousness are ours, now.

Call to Worship

Like trees planted by streams of water,

 **The faithful are rooted in God’s ways.**

We cannot be blown about by every movement,

 **When we follow the way of Christ Jesus our Lord.**

Meditate and study the scriptures handed down to us,

 **Find joy and peace in the wisdom of God.**

Come, join our hearts in worship,

 **God’s Spirit is present with us now.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Holy One, we confess that we are scattered in thought and desire. We confess that the ways of the world tug at us. We want to consume more, to be more, to struggle for more. Call us to the peace that surpasses all understanding. Help us to seek Your wisdom. Guide us through Scripture and prayer, song and tradition passed down to us, to find the deeper way You have set forth, through Jesus Christ Your Son, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

When we draw near to God, we find that God is already near us. When we seek God, we find that God has been with us, all along. Journey with God and know that God is with you every moment of the way. You do not need to ask God into your heart, because God is already there. Instead, acknowledge God, trust in the Spirit, and go forth with Christ. You are loved and forgiven, a blessed child of God. Amen.

Prayer

God of the Deep, Your Spirit hovered over the face of the deep at the beginning of creation. Your Wisdom calls us to seek the deeper way of love and understanding. Your Son calls us to love more deeply, rooted in the Source Of All Being that is You. May we find the Transformative Spirit within us. May we truly seek to care for those around us, and may we live into ways that bring justice and peace in this world. In Your name we pray. Amen.