Worship Resources for September 24th, 2017—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

Narrative Lectionary: Jacob’s Dream, Genesis 27:1-4, 15-23; 28:10-17

The people of Israel are barely out of Egypt, hardly have had time to celebrate their new freedom when they begin complaining. In Exodus 16:2-15, the people grumble against Moses and Aaron. They would rather have died in Egypt where they had enough to eat then to live in the wilderness where they are hungry. God provides bread for the people—manna from heaven—along with quails to eat, as a sign that God is the one who provides for them, and the same God who brought them out of Egypt. The manna is different from the bread they have known, and when they ask, “What is it?” as if they were children turning up their noses at food that looked strange, Moses replies, like a parent, “It’s the bread God has given you to eat.”

The psalmist calls the congregation to sing praises to God in Psalm 105:1-6, 37-45, and recalls how God brought the people out of Egypt, appearing as a pillar of fire by night and a cloud by day. The psalmist sings of how God brought the people out with the plunder of Egypt and provided manna and quail, and water from a rock, because God fulfills their promises. God is the one who leads and provides for the people, and gives them the law, so they might be a people who are witnesses of God’s deeds.

God changes their mind in Jonah 3:10-4:11 because the people of Nineveh have changed their ways, but Jonah is upset. It’s not fair to Jonah, who almost ran away because they didn’t want to prophesy that God was going to destroy Nineveh, and then when they did do what God wanted, God decided not to destroy the people because they actually listened to Jonah. Jonah was one of the most successful prophets—the people listened, repented, and changed their ways! But Jonah is stubborn and having a tantrum like a child. God asks Jonah, “why are you so upset?” and points out how many people, and animals, were in Nineveh, and that God cares for each of them just like God cares for Jonah.

Psalm 145:1-8 is a song of meditation. The psalmist blesses and praises God, calling upon others to praise God. The psalmist ponders God’s mighty acts in creation and how each generation shall know God’s wondrous works. Because the great deeds are still told from generation to generation, all shall hear and know the goodness of God’s works.

We move from Romans to Philippians in the Epistle reading, beginning with 1:21-30. Paul writes to the church in Philippi from prison, and while Paul is glad to be alive, Paul also believes and trusts in the glory that awaits him. “Living is Christ and dying is gain.” If he lives, he is a witness of Christ to the people. If he dies, he is with Christ. He desires to be with Christ, but knows his work is not done, as ours is not done. Paul encourages the church in Philippi to live in Christ’s example. The church has experienced some infighting and division (see chapter 4) but Paul’s instruction is gentle and encouraging of them to be of the mind of Christ and to witness by their lives.

Matthew 20:1-16 is the Parable of the Workers in the Field. Jesus declares that the kingdom of heaven is like a landowner who hired laborers for his field, and went out at different times of the day to hire them. At the end of the day, however, the laborer pays each of them the same wage—for those who worked all day to those who worked for the last hour. The ones who worked all day grumble and complain, but the landowner reminds them that they agreed to the usual daily wage. “Take what belongs to you and go; I choose to give to the last the same as I give to you.” The landowner asks if the workers are envious because he is generous. Jesus then declares that so the first will be last, and the last will be first. God is the one who determines and decides the reward for this life, which is eternal life, and some of us come to God early on in life and others late. We should rejoice that those laborers found work late in the day, when it normally would be impossible. We should rejoice when others come to God, even if it has taken a lot longer to turn to God’s ways for them.

The Narrative Lectionary turns to Jacob’s dream in Genesis 27 and 28, but begins with his father Isaac blessing Jacob instead of Esau, through Rebekah and Jacob’s scheming. Afterwards, Jacob has to flee his brother’s wrath and goes to the house of Laban, Rebekah’s brother. On the way, he has a dream while lying upon a stone, a dream of a ladder to heaven with angels ascending and descending. God promises Jacob that God will fulfill the promise given to Abraham, that the land stretching as far as he can see will belong to his descendants. God also promises that all the families of the earth will be blessed in Jacob and in Jacob’s children. God also promises to bring Jacob back to this land, no matter where they go, because God promises to be with them.

Jesus recounts this dream of Jacob in John 1:50-51, that the disciples themselves will see the heavens open up and angels ascending and descending. What the disciples are experiencing now is only a glimpse of what they will behold, as they will inherit the promises of God given to Jacob.

Much of Western society has appropriated an idea of karma from Eastern religions—we have taken this idea that if someone does something bad, something bad will happen to them. We even desire it. All we have done is appropriate the idea of karma for our own desires of revenge. But this isn’t how God works. The first will be last and the last will be first is not karma, but rather that everyone gets what they need—not what they deserve. The workers at the beginning of the day get the same as at the end of the day. Jonah was saved from the whale and the people were saved from the wrath of God, the consequences of their own sins. God provided for Jonah and for the people equally, but to Jonah, it didn’t seem fair. To the workers at the end of the day, it didn’t seem fare. Probably to Esau, Jacob stealing the blessing didn’t seem fair. But God promised that all families would be blessed through Jacob’s family. God’s promises are for all. God does not use revenge, or payback, or our own twisted understanding of karma. Rather, God’s justice is restoration. All are restored to equal footing. At the end of the day, all have enough to eat as with the workers in the field; all have their needs met, all are saved, as with Jonah and Nineveh.

Call to Worship

Lift up your hearts and focus your thoughts;

 **The Spirit of God is upon us.**

Stop for a moment.

*(pause)*

Turn away from the busy-ness of the world around you;

 **The Spirit of God is upon us.**

Take a moment, close your eyes, and breathe deeply.

*(pause)*

Breathe in, breathe out, knowing that God is present here;

 **The Spirit of God is upon us.**

Be present. Be alive. Be here.

*(pause)*

Join your hearts in worship.

 **The Spirit of God is upon us!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Wondrous God, we confess that we are a cantankerous and ornery bunch at times. We complain about the little things and do not appreciate all the blessings we have. We want what others have, and we complain about how much better other people have it. We confess that we are not satisfied with what You have provided. At other times, we take what we have for granted, and we tell others they should be happy with the scraps left over. Forgive us for being short sighted, selfish, and ungrateful. Forgive us for not seeing the world as Your gift to us, and that we need to care for its resources together. Forgive us for not finding value in sharing what we have with others, and being content when our needs are met. Call us into the way of life You have shown us: to love our neighbors as ourselves, to carry one another’s burdens, and to participate in the beloved community, by remembering we are dependent upon one another. In the name of Jesus, who laid down his life for us, who gave everything for all, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

Christ said, “Peace I leave with you; my peace I give to you.” Christ does not give as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be troubled, and do not let them be afraid. God renews your strength; God restores your courage; God revives your heart. You are forgiven and loved. Go with Christ’s peace in your hearts, and live. Amen.

Prayer

God of Justice, Your ways are not our ways. We continue to speak in hierarchies; You continue to tell us the mountains will come down and the valleys will be raised up. We continue to act as if systems cannot be changed or dismantled; You speak through Your prophets that a highway will cut through the wilderness and streams will rise in the desert. Guide us to turn to Your ways, O God, to hear Your voice and to follow the call of Your prophets. You are making all things new, and the ways we speak and understand will crumble with the weight of Your justice, that restores all to Your created intention. Guide us to listen, to follow, and to live into Your ways of justice, so that the world will be made new. Amen.