Worship Resources for September 27th, 2015—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Esther 7:1-6, 9-10; 9:20-22 or Numbers 11:4-6, 10-16, 24-29; Psalm 19:7-14 or Psalm 124; James 5:13-20; Mark 9:38-50

Narrative Lectionary: Jacob Wrestles God, Genesis 32:22-30 (Mark 14:32-36)

The passages from Esther contain the background for the Jewish holiday of Purim. Esther, heeding the advice of her uncle, risked her own life to speak to the king at first, and that is how she was able to hold this great banquet (see chapter 5). On this second day of this feast, she reveals who she is as a Jew, and what is about to happen to her people at the hands of Haman. Because of her deeds, and in remembrance of what happened, the holiday was created. Besides the sayings of Wisdom, the Wisdom Literature in the Hebrew Scriptures also records the folk stories passed down from their time in exile, how they survived as a people in a foreign land.

The passages from Numbers tell a familiar story to the people of Israel: a time once again, in the wilderness, when they were complaining about their hardships, and wished they were back in Egypt. They had forgotten how bad things were, and instead complained about the manna they were given and the food they missed. Moses is fed up. He is burned out. He cannot meet the needs of the people. So God appoints seventy others to help prophesy to the people, to remove some of the burden from Moses. And when two others, who had not gone out to the tent of meeting, are found to be prophesying, some complain to Moses, but Moses tells them not to stop these two. Moses is glad for those who are willing to take on the work of God, and it does not matter to him—and it shouldn’t matter to others—whether they were part of the group or not.

The selection from Psalm 19 (it was also part of the lectionary options on September 13th) focuses on the second half of this psalm, the wisdom of following God’s ways as written in the words of the law, the ordinances and precepts set by God and written down by the ancestors of the faith. The psalmist ends with the prayer that his words and meditations be acceptable to God.

Psalm 124 gives thanks to God for deliverance—for if it had not been for God, it might have been the Israelites who were swept away in the flood instead of their enemies. The psalmist leads the congregation in a communal prayer, knowing that it could have been them had God not been faithful to the people of Israel. The psalmist calls upon the congregation to put their hope and trust in God, because God has been faithful.

James 5:13-20 concludes the readings from the Letter of James, with a call to prayer. This letter, seen as a continuation of Wisdom literature in the New Testament, has been mainly about living out one’s faith, that “faith without works is dead.” James has written about caring for the most vulnerable, helping those in need, and now James writes about living out one’s faith through prayer. Prayer is an important work that we do, individually and collectively. Sickness was still seen, often enough, as a result of sin, so James concludes with a call for prayer for healing that is both physical as well as spiritual.

Mark 9:38-50 contains three parts: the first part is a dialogue between the disciple John and Jesus. John tells Jesus about seeing another person casting out demons in Jesus’ name, and they tried to stop him because he wasn’t one of them. But Jesus tells John that whoever is not against us is for us. This opens up the next two parts of this passage: acts of kindness and goodness are part of the kingdom, and should not be stopped. Stumbling blocks occur when we think we know better—when others have to do things our way. We are the ones who turn others away because they don’t do it our way. Jesus warns against causing others to stumble because of our sins. The third part is about being salt in ourselves—allowing for a little grace to go around, and be at peace, and not worry so much about what others are doing.

The Narrative Lectionary contains the story of Jacob wrestling the angel. Jacob and his family have finally set out from his wives’ father, and he is trading one family drama for another—he is about to encounter his twin brother Esau that he has not seen since he tricked Isaac out of his blessing. But he is given a new name, Israel—one who wrestles with God, after his encounter with the angel this night. His encounter with Esau is one of blessing, not of cursing, and the fulfillment of God’s promise made to his grandparents long ago is fulfilled through Jacob and his children.

Mark 14:32-36 takes place in the Garden of Gethsemane. Jesus wrestles with his calling by his Father God, to go to the cross. Jesus is distressed, but also prays to do the will of God, though he is afraid. Jacob was afraid to meet his brother, but was renewed with strength, and a new name, in his encounter with the angel. Jesus appears to go forth from the garden with the courage to go forward.

We have our own issues to wrestle with, our own challenges to our faith. All too often we are quick to point out the speck in someone else’s eye—whether it be what we perceive as sin, or a flaw in their thinking, or their political opinion that is different from ours—rather than the log in our own eye, what is holding us back from God. There is plenty to challenge us in our walk with Jesus, but often it is much easier to point out someone else’s faults. Sometimes, in mainline liberal Christianity, this can be our greatest sin—boasting about how open minded we are and how narrow others are, and we don’t even perceive that we have created a stumbling block for others and for ourselves.

Call to Worship

Lift up your hearts to God, who has made us all;

 **Let us lift up our prayers and praises to God our Creator.**

Listen to the voice of God who is calling you;

 **God is calling us into the way of love, mercy, and justice.**

Follow Jesus, who leads us in the way of love;

 **May we have the courage to love our neighbor as ourselves.**

In this time of worship, may we be inspired, encouraged, and filled with the Spirit,

**To do the work that God has prepared for us.**

**May we enter this time of worship with gladness and thanksgiving for what God has done for us.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of wisdom and insight, forgive us when we judge others. Forgive us when we dismiss others from our lives by belittling their beliefs and opinions, without challenging our own. Call inside our hearts to look inward at our hidden faults. Call inside our hearts to show compassion and love to those who differ from us. In the name of Christ, who judges our hearts, but loves us unconditionally, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon.

You are not perfect. You are going to mess up. You are going to continue to make mistakes. But know this: God loves you. God is going to help you to set yourself right. God is calling you back. Listen for the voice of God. Feel the movement of the Spirit in your life. Trust the love of Jesus that purifies us again and again. Go and share the Good News. Amen.

Prayer

Author of Salvation, we call upon You to write in our hearts a new story. The world is writing a story that declares we are only worthy when we have material possessions and notoriety. The world is writing a story that is enticing to us, causing us to desire more and more. But You are writing a story of love, in which we are valued for the love we have for one another. Direct us to follow the example of Jesus, who gave his life for us because he loved so much. May we live into the way of Christ. Amen.