Worship Resources for September 27th, 2020—Seventeenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Exodus 17:1-7 and Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16; Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32 and Psalm 25:1-9; Philippians 2:1-13; Matthew 21:23-32

Narrative Lectionary: God Works Through Joseph, Genesis 37:3-8, 17b-22, 26-34; 50:15-21 (Luke 6:35)

The people of Israel complained once again to Moses, this time about water in Exodus 17:1-7. When the people quarreled with Moses, they argued that Moses brought them out of Egypt to die in the wilderness, for they have no water. Moses reminded them it was God who brought them, questioning why they would want to test God. Nonetheless, the people argued that Moses wanted them and their children and livestock to die. Moses turned to God, fearful that the people might kill him. God told Moses to take some of the elders with him, to go ahead of the people to Horeb and to strike the rock with the staff Moses used to part the Red Sea. When he struck the rock in the sight of the elders, water came forth. Moses gave a name to the place, related to Quarreling, for the people tested God, wondering if God was with them.

The psalmist begins Psalm 78 calling the people to listen, for God is speaking. In verses 1-4, the psalmist speaks of parables and dark sayings of old, that the psalmist recalls the ancient stories that were passed on to the people. What God did for the people in the past must be told to a new generation. There is power, and almost a magical feel to these words calling the listener to pay attention. Verses 12-16 speak of the Exodus, of God parting the Red Sea, of journeying with the people through the wilderness, and bringing forth streams of water from the rock.

The second selection of the Hebrew Scriptures focuses on Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32. In verses 1-4, the prophet Ezekiel condemned an old proverb that suggested sin was passed down through generations. Instead, God spoke through the prophet that all individuals are important and belong to God. Those who sinned were responsible for the consequences of their sin, which is death. In verses 25-32, God insisted that God’s desire for the people of Israel is life, not death. The people complained that God’s ways are unfair, but God points it back to them, that their ways of evil and sin are unfair. God called upon the people to transform their heart and lives, for God is the only judge, and God is the one rooting for them to choose the way of life. Evil ways led to the people’s ruin, but repentance would lead them to life.

The psalmist calls upon God for protection from their enemies at the beginning of Psalm 25. The psalmist trusts in God and seeks God’s ways. They plead for God to not hold their past sins against them, but instead, for God to remember God’s steadfast love and mercy. God is the one who teaches sinners the true way and leads those who are humble.

Paul instructed the church in Philippi to be of the same mind in Philippians 2:1-13. Paul hoped the Philippians would show concern for the needs of each other and not for their own selfish gain. Part of the context for Paul’s writing to this church was that missionaries had come, who were proclaiming that followers of Jesus must still be circumcised. Paul shared with the church a corporate confession in the hope of unifying the believers in Christ, for it is Christ that made them one, not traditions. Christ didn’t come to place burdens on believers, exploiting his equality with God. Instead, Christ emptied himself and became humble to the point of death on the cross. Paul called upon the Philippians to remember what they learned and to work out their own salvation in humbleness with God.

Jesus was questioned by the elders and leaders at the temple in Matthew 21:23-32. They wanted to know by what authority he was teaching and performing miracles, and who gave him that authority? Jesus asked them a question in response, about John the Baptist’s own baptism. The leaders were afraid to answer—because John was very popular among the people and killed by their tyrant king. They didn’t want to look bad in front of the crowd. But if they dared to say that John’s baptism was from heaven, they knew their credibility would be shot. So, they said they didn’t know. Jesus responded that he also wouldn’t tell them by what authority he was ministering. Jesus continued with a parable, beginning with a usual question: “What do you think?” He told a short story of a man who had two sons. The man told his sons to go work in the field; the first said he wouldn’t, the second said he would. However, the first son changed his mind and went to work, and the second never showed up. Which of the two was faithful? The religious leaders of the temple answered correctly. Jesus responded that tax collectors and sex workers would enter the kingdom of God ahead of them, because these outsiders believed John, who came before Jesus, and the religious leaders still would not change their minds and believe, even after they saw people turning their lives around.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on how God worked through Joseph. Joseph was the son of Jacob in his old age, a son he could spend more time with and enjoy, and he gave him a beautiful robe. Joseph was a dreamer, and he told his brothers about his dreams, in which he was like a sheaf in the field and the other sheaves bowed to him. His brothers hated him for it. When Joseph was sent to find his brothers out in the fields, they saw him coming from a distance and plotted to kill him, though his oldest brother Reuben planned to rescue him later. However, when Reuben was gone, Judah recognized an opportunity to make some money and convinced his other brothers to sell Joseph into slavery and tell their father he was killed. Long after their childhood, Joseph rose to prominence and became the right hand of Pharaoh, saving an entire region from famine. Joseph and his brothers were reunited, and Jacob came to Egypt and died there, reunited with his lost son. In Genesis 50:15-20, Joseph’s brothers are worried that he will retaliate against them for what they did to him, now that Jacob is dead, but Joseph assures them to not be afraid: even though they had intended him harm, Joseph believes that God used it for good.

Far too often, our human instinct is one of self-preservation. Our intentions work toward our survival at the cost of others. But God intends something different. The leaders in Jesus’ day intended to keep order the way they knew best, considering tax collectors and sex workers sinners and outcasts. However, they came to John, because John called everyone to repent, including the religious leaders. John told everyone they had an opportunity for new life with God. Jesus continued that ministry, but outside of the bounds of the religious leaders. They could not see the goodness of God at work because it did not follow their traditions and rules. The first will be last, and the last will be first. Those who think they know it all, right and wrong, will often find themselves on the outs at the end. Those who struggle in this life, who struggle because their choices are limited but desire to live rightly, to love their neighbors, to care for other’s needs, will find their lives, and God welcomes them in.

Call to Worship

**Jesus told the fishermen,**

**Come, follow Me.**

**Jesus told the Samaritan woman at the well,**

**Come, follow Me.**

**Jesus told the tax collectors despised by their neighbors,**

**Come, follow Me.**

**Jesus told the women working on the streets,**

**Come, follow Me.**

**Jesus told the poor, the orphans, the widows, and the lost,**

**You are beloved in the kingdom of God.**

**Jesus told the sick and the disabled and the beggars,**

**Your faith makes you whole and good.**

**Jesus tells us that no matter who we are, he needs us,**

**And that we belong to the kingdom of God.**

**Come, follow Jesus.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we are so quick to draw the line, to determine who is in and who is out. We fall into the patterns of binary either-or thinking that traps us. You came to erase the lines, to broaden our horizons. You came into our lives as one of us, showing us mercy and compassion and love. Help us to tear down the walls in our thinking, to erase the boundary lines we have drawn. Expand our hearts and minds to embrace Your beloved community, for all of us on this earth are Your children. All of us are important and belong. All of us have hearts that beat and souls that are known to You. Help us to hear Your call on our lives to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with You. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Psalm 40:1-3)

“I waited patiently for the Lord; God inclined and heard my cry. God lifted me up from the desolate pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock. God put a new song in my mouth, a song of praise, and many will see and trust in God.” God hears our prayers, lifts us up, and gives us reason to praise. Listen to the new song that God has placed in you, and sing your hearts out, for you are loved, forgiven, and restored. Go, sing God’s praise, and share the Good News. Amen.

Prayer

Loving God, You call us by name. You know our hearts, our inmost thoughts. Your desire for us is to love You and to love one another as we love ourselves. It is such a simple calling, a simple commandment, and yet, we fail to live it out. Guide us in our lives to the ways of Your love. In this quickdraw world, help us to be slow to anger. In a world of violence and fear, may we live into Your ways of peace and hope. May we transform fear into awe. Help us to ponder Your teachings to our ancestors with wisdom and understanding and live our lives in ways that are an example to others. Wisdom from on high, guide us in our daily lives. In Christ’s name we pray. Amen.