Worship Resources for September 28th, 2014—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

Narrative Lectionary: Rescue at the Sea, Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29 (Matthew 2:13-15)

In our first thread of the Hebrew Scriptures this season, we have followed the ancestors of our faith all the way from Abraham and Sarah to the people in the wilderness, who have quarreled with Moses. Last week it was because they had no bread; this week, it is because they have no water. Moses is instructed by God to strike the rock at Horeb with that same staff that he struck the Nile River with, and water flows from the rock. The people have very quickly forgotten what God has already done for them, but more importantly, the people seem to have forgotten that God is always with them. Instead of trusting God, they have quarreled with God.

Our second thread follows the prophets, and here Ezekiel explains that God does not desire punishment, but restoration. Our prophets show us that we reap what we sow, the consequences of our actions; but when we repent, when we turn back to God, we shall live. God’s desire for us is life. God’s desire for us is reconciliation and restoration. God asks the people through Ezekiel why will they die? The choice is theirs. Turn back to God, for this is what God desires.

Psalm 25:1-9 sings that God is the one who leads us and teaches us. The psalmist asks God to forget the sins of their youth, for they have also turned away from their sins. The psalmist asks God to lead them in the right ways, and that in humility all those who repent and turn to God will learn God’s ways.

Psalm 78:1-4, 12-16 sings praises for what God has done for their ancestors. Dramatically the psalm begins with “dark sayings of old,” remembering God’s faithfulness, and remembers happily how God provided for the people in the wilderness, striking rocks and bringing forth water. The psalmist leaves out how the people quarreled and questioned God, but instead of focusing on what the people have done, the psalmist focuses solely on what God has done for them.

Philippians 2:1-13 contains Paul’s urging for the people in Philippi to be of one mind, to work together for God (Paul will reveal in chapter 4 that there has been a little quarrel going on in this church). Paul doesn’t focus on the negative but focuses on the positive: look to the interests of others, look to Christ, and focus on what Christ has done for you. Paul quotes this ancient church hymn of how Jesus emptied himself on the cross so that we might call him Lord, and this same Christ is at work in all of us, so we ought to be humble and lift up one another.

Matthew 21:23-32 begins with a question from the Pharisees, which Jesus turns around and questions them about authority. Then Jesus tells a parable of two sons, one who told his father he would work, but didn’t, and another who said he wouldn’t, but changed his mind and did. Jesus is more concerned about right action than right belief. The religious leaders who have come to him are concerned in this conversation in which who is right—they, or Jesus. Jesus says, look at who is following God’s ways—that is more important.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on Exodus 14:10-14, 21-29—the story of the deliverance of the people by God out of slavery. The people are afraid of Pharaoh, and are afraid of failure. But unlike the times when they complain to God about being hungry or thirsty in the wilderness, Moses is confident in his response to the people: “Don’t be afraid: stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today” (vs. 13a). While Moses doesn’t know how to respond to them in the wilderness, while he goes to God asking what he should do because of their complaining, here he is confident that God is with them, and he gives the people courage in his resolve.

Matthew 2:13-15 connects the story of the Exodus with Jesus’ own personal story, in Matthew’s account. Jesus is taken by Joseph and Mary to Egypt out of fear of Herod, until Herod’s death. Jesus’ story becomes a mirror of Moses’ story in Matthew’s account of Jesus’ birth.

Do you have doubts about God’s presence, in your life, in your church, in the world? Look to where people are acting in the way of God. It might not be where you think to look. Jesus points out that the tax collectors and prostitutes may be ahead of religious leaders. It’s not about right belief as much as it is about right response to belief—our actions. God does not desire punishment, but restoration. The prophets, such as Amos, rejected right belief in terms of right rituals and worship—but rather justice, mercy, loving-kindness, humility—this is what God desires. How we live out our faith in our daily lives is what is most important rather than what we say about what we believe.

Call to Worship

God is calling you

 **Come, and hear the Good News of Jesus!**

God is calling you

 **Come, and know that God Loves You!**

God is calling you

 **Come, and feel the Spirit move within us.**

God is calling us

 **Come, let us worship our God together!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Jesus our Teacher, we confess that we do not follow Your ways. We say we believe in You as our Savior, and yet do not help to save others from poverty and hunger. We say we believe in You as our Lord, and yet we put worldly success and possessions above the needs of others, even above You. Forgive us for putting more value on our words about You than how we respond to Your love. Guide us into living out our faith, so that Your love may be experienced, rather than just told, to the world. In Your name we pray that we might turn back to You. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

No matter where we roam, God is calling us back. God’s voice is tugging our heartstrings back to loving our neighbors and remembering that we are loved by God. This is what it means to believe in God, for God is love. Know that you are loved and forgiven, and live out that love in faith. Amen.

Prayer

Creator God, create in us new hearts that seek to love one another, rather than minds that are concerned more about being right. May the words of the prophets of long ago echo within us, and turn us to seek justice and mercy. May the teachings of the parables remind us that the way we live out our faith is our most important witness. May the love of God found in the scriptures be on our lips, so that we can share this Good News. Amen.