Worship Resources for September 30th, 2012—Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

Since the beginning of September, the first choice of Old Testament readings in the Lectionary has followed the Wisdom Literature of the Old Testament, instead of the history and prophets. This Sunday’s reading is from Esther, telling the story of how the festival of Purim came to be, as Esther gained the king’s favor and was able to petition for her people to be saved. As we enter Fall and our Jewish friends begin to celebrate, it is good for us to also remember these stories of our history and to learn about the traditions of the Jewish faith.

Our second thread from the Prophets goes back to the Torah, to a story of Moses, once again receiving the complaints of the people in the desert. To relieve Moses of some of the burden, God also called seventy elders to help carry the burden. In addition, God calls two more to be prophets, Eldad and Medad, who help carry on the prophetic mission of God. When others, including Joshua, question Moses about this, Moses exclaims, “Would that all the Lord’s people were prophets, and that the Lord would put his spirit on them!” Moses has felt such a great burden as the leader that he understood the blessing of having others to help in leading and doing the work of God. We are called not to bear the burden of leadership alone.

Psalm 19:7-14 sings of staying true to God’s ways, even asking God to “clear me from hidden faults.” When we seek God’s guidance in our lives, we have a desire to bring our whole lives into alignment with God’s vision, even seeking to bring into light the places where we have been selfish, the places we have justified our own ways. When we know God’s love, we desire to live fully into God’s ways.

Psalm 124 is a song of praise for God’s deliverance when Israel was under attack. The thanksgiving and glory are given to God instead of to human beings. We also are called to give our thanks and praise to God when we are delivered from our own trials and difficulties, remembering God’s faithfulness endures forever.

Mark 9:38-50 reminds us that we need to focus on our own faults, our own temptations and struggles, instead of pointing the finger at others. When the disciples are concerned because they see someone else casting out demons in Jesus’ name and he isn’t part of their group, Jesus tells the disciples not to stop him for “whoever is not against us is for us.” In a world of ecumenical and interfaith dialogue, we have much more in common when we work together against the struggles of the world such as hatred, intolerance, poverty, war, and unequal education. We ought to be working with others, or at least blessing the work of others instead of trying to compete and/or condemn.

Jesus further warns against causing others to sin, placing stumbling blocks in front of those new to the faith. All too often, we want people to conform to us, instead of to the way of God. Instead of worrying about the faults of others, we need to be concerned about ourselves and what we do to harm another’s relationship with God and with others. We need to be the salt of the earth, giving all things flavor, blessing instead of cursing, encouraging growth instead of breaking down.

James 5:13-20 ends this month-long focus on James. The only book in the New Testament that also falls into the same themes and categories of Wisdom Literature, we are reminded of the practical in the faith. We should pray for one another, especially those that are sick. If we are cheerful, we should use our good cheer to praise God. And we are reminded that we are called to guide, nurture, and help people back to the faith. While we tend to think about faith in Jesus in the New Testament, we tend to think of it as a new thing, of bringing new people to the faith—but James reminds us that the faith of Jesus is rooted in the faith of our ancestors in the Hebrew Bible. Wandering from the faith was wandering from the ways of God, and all of us are called to help each other renew and strengthen their relationship with God, but not by judging and condemning.

We have wonderful traditions, customs and stories, but we are not bound to them. However, we can learn from them. We are all called, as Moses exclaimed that would not all God’s people be called, to help lead and guide in the faith. We model that faith in our lives, and we can do no more than live our lives as best we can in God’s ways and model that life to others. We do better when we turn from judging and instead bless where we find common ground and mutual compassion.

Call to Worship

Leader: We gather in this space to praise God!

People: We give thanks for all God is doing in our lives and in our world.

Leader: We gather in this space to pray to God.

People: We join in solidarity with those in other places of worship, remembering we are all God’s children.

Leader: We gather in this space to live in peace with God.

People: We learn the teachings of peace from God through the scriptures and the life of Jesus, so that we might live in peace with one another.

Leader: Come, let us join together in worship.

All: Come, let us live into God’s ways of love, justice and peace. Come!

Prayer of Confession

God of Wholeness, we confess to You that we have been divisive. We have sought our own way; we have shamed others; we have brought stumbling blocks in front of others. We have cursed instead of blessed. We have condemned instead of encouraged. We have thought our way was best because it suited ourselves best. Forgive us, O God, when we have judged others instead of judging ourselves. Forgive us, O God, for not seeking Your ways and for not listening to learn from others. Call us back to Your path, and call us into the spirit of listening, blessing and welcoming others first. In the name of Jesus, who continues to teach us, we pray. Amen.

Assurance of Pardon

We are all children of God. We still see in the mirror dimly, we still think like children. We know that God loves us, God forgives us, and God still instructs us on how we ought to live. We are always guided back to the way of God. Go forth, sharing this Good News. Amen.

Prayer

Teacher God, give us a gentle heart so that we might be open to learning new things. Give us new ears to hear from diverse voices. Give us new eyes to see others as You see them. Give us new hands that reach out in openness instead of judgment. Teach us Your ways of love and compassion, justice and peace, so that we might be Your witnesses in our world. In the name of Jesus the Christ, our Teacher and Friend, we pray. Amen.