Worship Resources for September 30, 2018—Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost

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

Narrative Lectionary: Rescue at the Sea, Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29 (Matthew 2:13-15)

The first selection from the Hebrew Scriptures turns to Esther. This passage contains the climax of the story: Esther, the queen of Persia, has managed to foil Haman’s plot, to commit genocide against her people. In this moment, Esther reveals that she herself is Jewish, and uses her position—having gained the favor of the king—to stop Haman. He is hanged on the very gallows he constructed to kill her relative Mordecai. The remembrance of this event becomes a festival in the month of Adar known as Purim.

Psalm 124 harkens back to the memories of the people who escaped the hand of Egypt. A song sung to remember this event, it also commemorates every time the people have been delivered by God out of the hands of their enemies. The psalmist praises God, knowing that without God, they would not have made it through.

The second selection from the Hebrew Scriptures recalls how the people of Israel, now free from slavery in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, began complaining again about the manna they were provided. They missed the meat and produce they had in Egypt, and Moses snaps. He’s had enough of their complaining. He tells God he’s ready to just die rather than deal with all their whining. So God provides Moses with help, telling Moses to gather seventy elders, and giving them some of the same spirit he gave Moses, so they could prophesy. But two others also began to prophesy who weren’t gathered in the tent, and they continued to do so afterward. Joshua complains to Moses about the two and tells Moses to stop them, but Moses asks Joshua if he’s jealous. Isn’t it a wonderful thing that these two have God’s spirit? Would that all the people did!

Psalm 19:7-14 speaks of finding joy in the teachings of God as found in the law, ordinances and statues. In living by them, one finds great reward, more than jewels or gold. But one still may go astray. The psalmist asks for God to cleanse them from hidden shortcomings, and to be kept safe from those who do not follow God’s ways. The psalmist finishes by asking for God’s acceptance of their prayer and meditations.

The epistle readings from James conclude this week with 5:13-20. The conclusion of his teaching is that prayer and confession are essential to Christian life. Prayers are for healing, as is confession—that there might be forgiveness and reconciliation. The author of James uses Elijah as an example, because he was also a human being just like anyone else, but he prayed, and God worked through him. God works through us in our prayers, and our prayers also become action, in confession and forgiveness.

When some of the disciples tell Jesus that there is someone else casting out demons in his name, Jesus declares that whoever is not against them is for them. In Mark 9:38-50, Jesus teaches the disciples to not become stumbling blocks, going as far as to say if your hand or foot causes you to stumble to cut it off. The disciples thought they were special for being chosen by Jesus, but being chosen does not mean God’s spirit is limited to only those chosen. Rather, seeking our own satisfaction and desires leads us to dead ends and death itself; seeking the way of God, and finding God already at work in the people and world around us, we find life.

The Narrative Lectionary focuses on the deliverance of the people of Israel from Egypt as they traveled through the Red Sea. In Exodus 14:5-7, 10-14, 21-29, Pharaoh pursues the people of Israel. As the chariots gain on the Israelites, the people begin to complain to Moses that it would be better to serve the Egyptians than to die there in the wilderness. But God delivers the people through Moses, having the waters come back over Pharaoh’s army, while the people make it safely across on dry land.

In Matthew 2:13-15, God speaks to Joseph in a dream to take Mary and Jesus to hide in Egypt until Herod is dead. The writer of Matthew’s gospel account links this to God’s promises to the people of Israel, who were called out of Egypt into safety.

Sometimes we become perfectionists, in that the only right way to do something is the way we know, and all others are wrong or insufficient. When we allow our egos to take hold, when we allow only our experience as the valid experience, we miss out on what God is doing around us. We miss seeing how God is at work in our neighbors who are different from us, who come from different backgrounds, who may follow Jesus differently than we do. We may miss what God is doing through people of different religions, or no religion at all. We can easily become stumbling blocks if we think good can only be done through the church, or only through our church. However, when we are open to God’s Spirit, and we set aside our ego and fear, we find that God is at work in the world around us, in the people near us, in the community that surrounds us. And sometimes God is calling us to partner with those already doing the work, instead of us trying to take over or stop it.

Call to Worship

The Spirit is at work in the community around us;

**Open our minds, O God, to experiencing Your Spirit here and now.**

Christ is at work in the hearts of people near us;

**Open our hearts, O God, to love all our neighbors as ourselves.**

Our Eternal God is doing something new in our world;

**Open us, O God, to new understandings and insights.**

Our Wondrous God is continuing to change our hearts, our minds, and our world;

**Come, worship God, who leads us into eternal life.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that our egos get in the way. We think we know best. We think our experience gives us better insight. We think our ways are the only ways. Even when we know we need to change, we resist it, because we fear what we will lose. Even when we know we need to see things in a new way, we deny it, and insist that there is only one way. Forgive us for our short-sightedness. Forgive us for our denial. Forgive us for our stubbornness and selfishness. Grant us grace. Grant us mercy. Open us slowly, so that we might adjust to Your wondrous and amazing light. In the name of the Light of the World, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance (from Lamentations 3:22-23)

“The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, God’s mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is Your faithfulness.” God’s mercy is new every moment. Know that you are forgiven, you are loved, and God has great and wondrous insights in store for you, if you are open to God. Go forth; be open, be blessed. Amen.

Prayer

Word of Life, guide us in our reading of Scripture. May we be faithful to the words that have been passed to us, by doing our part to study and understand the history and culture of the peoples who wrote them. May we be faithful to Your Spirit by entrusting these words in our heart and living out our faith, in how we love and care for others. May we be faithful to one another in prayer and perseverance, in continuing to be open to new insights and understandings. May You bless our understanding and hearing of the words, for You are the Living Word. Amen.