Worship Resources for September 7th—Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectonary: Exodus 12:1-14 or Ezekiel 33:7-11; Psalm 119:33-40 or Psalm 149; Romans 13:8-14; Matthew 18:15-20

Narrative Lectionary: Flood and Promise, Genesis 6:6-12; 9:8-15 (Matthew 8:24-27)

Starting today, I will blog both the [Revised Common Lectionary](http://lectionary.library.vanderbilt.edu/) and the [Narrative Lectionary](http://www.workingpreacher.org/content/narrative_lectionary_matthew_2014-2015_rev3.pdf).

Exodus 12:1-14 commemorates the first Passover, when the firstborn of Israel were spared and the Israelites prepared to leave Egypt, to escape from slavery and follow God into the wilderness. This passage describes how the Passover lamb was to be prepared, how the Israelites were to mark their doors, and that God would pass through the land of Egypt, and they were to remember this day. Feast days in the Israelite tradition were days of remembrance, of remembering what God has done for the people, and on this day, God has delivered them from slavery into freedom.

Ezekiel 33:7-11 contain God’s instructions to the prophet Ezekiel, that he is to say to the people whatever God says to him. In this case, God tells him that God does not desire punishment. God receives no pleasure from it. Instead, God desires repentance and restoration. God desires that the people turn back to God and change their ways. This is a shift in thinking—God’s desire is not punishment, but restoration. However, the people live with the consequences of their own actions, and if they do not turn back to God and to God’s ways, they reap what they sow.

Psalm 119:33-40 sings praises to God and asks for God’s guidance in life, for God to turn the singer away from the ways of the world and to the heart of God. The psalmist knows that life is found in living into God’s ways, but the ways of the world are tempting. The psalmist knows that joy and delight are found in living out the commandments, and asks for God’s help to follow them.

Psalm 149 calls upon the congregation to praise God and to celebrate God the Creator, their Maker. The psalmist also calls for vengeance against their enemies. This may have been a song to sing before battle, to stir up the warriors, but it also reminds the congregation that they must celebrate what God has done for them.

Paul echoes the call of Jesus to love one another in Romans 13:8-14. All commandments are summed up in loving one’s neighbor as one’s self, as Jesus spoke in the Gospels. Paul calls upon these early followers of Christ to love one another, for that is the best way of God. If one has love for their neighbor, they will not do things that put themselves or others into harm’s way, such as drunkenness, quarreling or jealousy. If one loves their neighbor, they seek the best for them, and they “put on the Lord Jesus Christ.”

This passage in Matthew is often called “the Matthew 18 Way,” in terms of resolving conflict. It is a good model, but sometimes we are too quick to jump to it without understanding the context of Jesus’ words. If we read the whole context of chapter 18, Jesus is concerned about stumbling blocks. He is concerned about those who would keep children and others who are vulnerable away. Jesus is also concerned about hoops to jump through and walls that we put up to keep others out instead of including them. He is concerned about the lost, and would rather look for the one lost sheep and leave behind the ninety-nine who are fine. And after this section of chapter 18, Jesus is concerned about forgiveness and again, what we do that keeps others out, that puts a stumbling block up for others that we would not put up for ourselves. So in that context, what does “the Matthew 18 Way” teach us? It’s about stumbling blocks and what we do to keep others out, and that ultimately the goal is not to be “right” and to change others, but rather to work towards restoration.

The Narrative Lectionary passages in Genesis share the story of Noah’s preparation for the flood, and God’s promise that God will never again destroy the earth by flood. This is not only a promise by God to never flood the earth in such a way again, but it is also a promise that God is not like the gods that the people have known. This God is a God of life, not of death and destruction. This God will become the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Jacob—the God of the people, the God of life.

Matthew 8:24-27, in which Jesus calms the storm, is also a reminder that God is a God of life. God does not desire destruction, but life. Jesus had taken a nap, and the disciples were afraid and felt like they were going to die, even though Jesus was with them. Fear can immobilize us. While we cannot easily let go of fear, we can let go of its power to freeze us.

God is the God of life. God’s desire is not punishment, but restoration. God’s desire is not exile, but return. God’s desire is not rejection, but inclusion. But we put stumbling blocks in the way for others, thinking they have to do things our way, or go through the hoops we once went through. We can even let fear keep us from including others. But God is the God of life, the God who restores and heals and brings justice and peace. We can let fear immobilize us, or we can let go of its power and lean on God, and work to live into God’s ways more fully.

Call to Worship (from Romans 13:8, 10)

Owe no one anything, except to love one another

 **For the one who loves has fulfilled the law.**

Love does no wrong to a neighbor;

 **Therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law.**

Live into God’s ways of love, justice, and peace;

 **Let us worship Christ, who leads us into light. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Almighty God, we confess that we have fallen short. We have looked to the ways of the world, to selfish gain and worldly success, and left behind our neighbors. We have turned our backs on the needs of others so that we can help ourselves get ahead first. Forgive us for looking only for our own interests instead of the needs of others around us. Help us to love our neighbor as ourselves, which You commanded us to do. In the name of Christ we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

We may forget, but God never forgets us. We may go astray, but God is ready to guide us back. We may feel lost, but God has already found us. Know that God loves you and desires new life for you. Know that you are forgiven, and God is with you. Amen.

Prayer

Holy God, our world has been wracked by violence. Things seem to be falling apart, and all we can do sometimes is focus on our own lives, our own homes, our own community, and move forward. Help us to seek You, and to turn our focus away from ourselves and to see how we can be a difference in the world. Guide us in Your ways of love, justice and mercy, so that we might live the life You have set before us. Help us to trust in You, when things are falling apart, that You will help us move on, and You will always lead us into new life. In the name of Christ our Savior we pray. Amen.