Worship Resources for September 8th, 2019—Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Jeremiah 18:1-11 and Psalm 139:1-6, 13-18; Deuteronomy 30:15-20 and Psalm 1; Philemon 1-21; Luke 14:25-33

Narrative Lectionary: Garden of Eden, Genesis 2:4b-25 (Mark 1:16-20 or Mark 10:6-8)

Continuing with Jeremiah, the first selection of the Hebrew Scriptures contains God’s vision to Jeremiah through metaphor. God tells Jeremiah in 18:1-11 to go to the potter’s house, to watch a potter who reworked a vessel out of clay from a spoiled, earlier version. God can do what the potter does, and rework something for good that was about to be discarded. God can save what was about to be destroyed, but only if the people turn; otherwise God can destroy and make something different. Jeremiah warns the people to change their ways.

Psalm 139 is a beautiful song of how God knows us intimately. God discerns our thoughts, knows the words before we speak them. This wisdom psalm speaks of the wonder and awe of God, and that there is no place one can hide from God. We are fearfully and wonderfully made by the God who is so amazingly wise beyond us.

In part of Moses’ final words to the Israelites, in Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Moses calls the people to choose between death and life. For those who choose to follow God and God’s ways, they will receive what has been promised to them. But for those whose hearts turn away, who choose other gods, they will not live long in the land, and will die. Blessings and curses have been set before the people. Moses implores them to choose the life that God desires for them, for that will lead to long life in the land God promised to their ancestors.

Psalm 1 is also a song of wisdom. Those who choose God’s ways and teachings through the commandments and ordinances are like trees planted by streams of water that yield fruit. The wicked are like chaff that blow away in the wind. God watches over the ways of the righteous. The wicked will perish, because they do not choose the ways that lead to life.

Paul’s letter to Philemon (the lectionary leaves off the last four verses) is the shortest book in the Bible. The first seven verses contain Paul’s salutations and greetings of Philemon, Apphia and Archippus, and the church in Philemon’s house. This was a personal letter to Philemon, who must have been a man of wealth to support a church in his house, along with owning slaves such as Onesimus. Onesimus escaped from Philemon, but met Paul while he was in prison, and Paul has sent him back to Philemon, probably carrying this letter. Paul writes to Onesimus to receive Philemon back, not as a slave, but as a brother who shares the gospel in Paul’s place. The letter doesn’t explicitly condemn slavery, but uses Christian love in a persuasive way to urge Philemon to accept Onesimus as a believer and brother in faith. Paul places his confidence in the receiver to do the right thing.

Jesus speaks to the crowds about the cost of following him in Luke 14:25-33. Jesus speaks in harsh language of how hard it is to be his disciple. The Harper Collins Study Bible determines that the use of the word hate in this passage is “prophetic hyperbole for the uncompromising loyalty required toward Jesus and the true family of disciples” (vs. 26). He speaks of weighing the cost, but concludes that in the end, if the things of this world hold us back, we cannot be faithful. If we do not give up all our worldly possessions in terms of the hold they have on us, we cannot follow Jesus and be his disciple.

The Narrative Lectionary begins a new year, following Mark, but begins with the Garden of Eden in Genesis 2:4b-25. The human being (adam in Hebrew simply means human being) is formed of the dust of the ground, then given the task of naming all the living creatures that God created. Then God recognized the human being had no partner, and so God creates a partner from its side. The partner is called Woman, and the human being renames themselves Man. The two are equal, naked, and have no shame in this creation story.

Mark 1:16-20 contains Jesus’ calling of the first disciples, of Simon and Andrew, of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, who left their father’s boat to follow Jesus. All Jesus said to Simon and Andrew was, “Follow me, and I will make you fish for people,” and they immediately left their nets and followed him.

Mark 10:6-8 refers to Genesis 1:27, that God created humanity, and Genesis 2:24, that the two become one flesh, that a man leaves his father and mother. The context of this passage is Jesus being questioned about whether it is lawful tor a man to divorce his wife. Jesus’ response is harsh: God’s intention is not divorce. Moses allowed for divorce, but Jesus says this is because of their hardness of heart, but God’s intention from the beginning of creation is for the marriage partners to join together as one.

Both the Revised Common Lectionary and the Narrative Lectionary deal with some of the hardest teachings of Jesus. It’s not meant to be easy for any of us. The world is harsh, and the systems and structures of our world—whether it is the consumer culture that drives us to produce more and more, working so hard that it threatens our families, or forms of oppression that literally tear families apart—crash against God’s desires for us. God’s intention for us is summed up in Jesus’ commandment to love God with our whole being and love our neighbor as ourselves. Family, marriage, friendship—all these are good and what God has designed, but the systemic sin of this world will threaten to destroy those. The good news is that in Christ we have forgiveness and the possibility of healing what the world has broken. We have the hope of mending relationships, before and after divorce—for divorce and broken relationships are a reality of this world—and we have the hope of reconciliation in Christ with one another.

Call to Worship

Take the offbeat path, the lesser-worn trail;

**Seek the deeper wisdom of God, and you will find your way.**

Meet the people on the margins, help those suffering from oppression;

**Follow Jesus, and learn how to love your neighbor and yourself.**

Seek peace by pursuing justice, practicing kindness and mercy;

**Know the Spirit is working all things in you for the goodness of God.**

Come, turn from the ways of the world, and into God’s ways;

**The journey may not be easy, but we are in this together.**

**Come, worship God, follow Jesus, and trust the Holy Spirit. Amen.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of justice and mercy, we confess that our ways are not always Your ways. We often choose the easier path where we do not have to see those who are suffering. We choose the well-worn trail for simple acts of kindness rather than the radical way of mercy, empathy, and compassion. We choose the hall of mirrors that shows us what we want to see, more of people like ourselves, rather than the long hall that requires the work of justice, leading toward restoration. Forgive us. Call us to double-back and relearn Your ways of justice, mercy, and love. Though they are hard, they are worth it, and they are what you intended before humanity made the world with the systems of sin we live in. Help us to crack open the hall of mirrors, to break away from the well-worn trail and take the more difficult way of love that calls us to meet the needs of others. In the name of Jesus Christ, who gave up the world’s ease and went to the cross, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

We can never be truly lost, because God is always with us. God knows exactly who we are, even when the systems of the world work to make us forget. We are made in the image of God, we were created to be together, partners with one another in tending the earth God made. This is who we are, beloved of God. Christ came to remind us of our beloved-ness. Know the forgiveness of God through Jesus Christ, follow the ways of God instead of the world, and have abundant life with all of humanity and creation. Amen.

Prayer

Storytelling God, You gave us a wonderful story of a garden, and a promise that the garden would return with an ever-flowing stream. Call us back into tending Your garden, caring for Your creation, and loving one another, all Your beloved children. Help us to find Your way in this world, and not the false ways. We are led astray by consumption, wealth, power, and worldly measures of success. Those are dead-ends. Help us to find the true road, the one in which we recognize our neighbors, remember the kindness and compassion that You planted in us, and the deep love You have for us that continues in our love for one another. Author of Salvation, help us to remember that in our end is our beginning, and in the beginning, the story of the garden that we still are called to live in. Amen.