Worship Resources for September 9th—Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Proverbs 22:1-2, 8-9, 22-23 and Psalm 125; Isaiah 35:4-7a and Psalm 146; James 2:1-10, (11-13), 14-17; Mark 7:24-37

Narrative Lectionary: Flood and Promise, Genesis 6:5-22; 8:6-12; 9:8-17 (Matthew 8:24-27)

The first selection from the Hebrew Scriptures has shifted from the rise of the kings of Israel, to Wisdom Literature. In these select verses from Proverbs 22, the writer reminds the listener that all things come from God, and it is better to be generous, for God is on the side of the poor and oppressed. Those who are generous are blessed.

Psalm 125 states that those who have their trust in God have the strength of mountains, they cannot be moved. God is with those who are righteous and do good, but God will lead away those who do evil. The psalmist calls a blessing upon those who do good and are upright in their hearts.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of God’s deliverance for those who have been oppressed in 35:4-7a. They shall sing praise to God, for God will come with vengeance against the oppressors. The prophet uses a favorite image found throughout Isaiah of bringing forth water in the desert, of how God will do what is impossible, and what is necessary, for the people in exile.

This song of praise in Psalm 146 sings of God who made heaven and earth, who executes justice for the oppressed. The psalmist warns not to put one’s trust in earthly princes, for God is the one who reigns forever, the one who made everything, and is on the side of the oppressed, the poor, the downtrodden. God upholds the orphan and widows, but those who are wicked will be led to ruin.

The Epistle reading continues with James chapter two, coming to the crux of their argument: faith without works is dead. The writer declares that God has chosen the poor to become heirs of the world, but if we choose only the rich and powerful, we are not living out Christ’s commandment to love our neighbor as ourselves. God is the one who judges, not us, and the standards we use to judge are terrible and always in the favor of the powerful and wealthy. Instead, we ought to show mercy, for mercy triumphs over judgment. Mercy means that love reigns in our hearts instead of pride or greed. Faith must include works.

Jesus helps two people in Mark 7:24-37. In the first story, Jesus enters a house and didn’t want anyone to know he was there. But there was a Syrophoenician woman inside, who had heard about Jesus, and she was there because her daughter had an unclean spirit. She begged Jesus to cast the demon out of her daughter, but at first Jesus refuses. He says that the children must be fed first, and that it wasn’t fair to take the children’s food and throw it to the dogs. Because that was how the people around them saw Syrophoenicians and others who were not of Israel—they were like dogs. But she insists that even the dogs lick the crumbs. She challenges Jesus, and Jesus has to see her as a human being. He tells her that for saying that, the demon has left her daughter. Next, Jesus returns to the region of Tyre, and a deaf man who has a speech impediment is brought to him. This man is also someone who would have been cast out in society, seen as unclean—but Jesus touches him, putting his fingers in the man’s ears and spitting, touching his tongue. Jesus calls for him to “be opened” and the man can hear and speak. Jesus orders them to tell no one, but the disciples keep spreading the word. One cannot help but wonder if Jesus was spurred on to help this man because of his earlier encounter with the Syrophoenician woman, that now he knew there were no human boundaries he could not cross, of clean and unclean, of inside and out, of outcast and neighbor.

The Narrative Lectionary turns to a new year, following the Gospel of Matthew, but the primary selections are from the Hebrew Scriptures, stories of God’s deliverance. We begin with Genesis 6:5-22, 8:6-12 and 9:8-17. God sees great wickedness on the earth, and decides to wipe the slate clean with a flood, telling Noah and his family to take certain pairs of animals and to make an ark. After the great flood, and after the water subsides, God recognizes that destruction is not the way. God makes a covenant with Noah and all creation, that God will never do this again, and God sets the bow in the clouds. This is not a bow that one ties around a present, but a bow that is a weapon—God hangs their weapon up forever. God will not be at war with the earth or with the people or creatures there. God is no longer a God of war, but God of the covenant.

In Matthew 8:24-27, a great windstorm arose on the sea while Jesus and the disciples were crossing in a boat—but Jesus had fallen asleep in the back of the boat. They were frightened, waking Jesus up. Jesus rebuked the storm, but he said, “Why are you afraid, you of little faith?” They had not remembered God’s covenant, and they had not remembered who Jesus was and that Jesus was with them, always.

Our God is the God who created heaven and earth, all creatures, and us. God is above all worldly rulers. They pass in season, but God reigns forever. Throughout Scripture, we know that God is always with the poor and the oppressed. God hears their cries. God knows when we have failed to help those in need, to love our neighbors as ourselves. God knows when we have twisted Scripture to justify hoarding wealth. But the scriptures are clear: all resources come from God, are blessings from God, and are to be used for God’s work. God’s work is among the people, especially the poor, the widow, and the orphan. God’s work is among the children separated from their parents at the border; those who are having their citizenship stripped from them; those who are incarcerated. God’s work is among the mothers grieving for their children; the people living on the streets; those who are downtrodden, depressed, anxious, and at the end of their hope. We must be with them, if we are to be with God.

Call to Worship (from Psalm 146:1-2, 5-7, 10)

Praise the Lord! Praise the Lord, O my soul!

 **I will praise the Lord as long as I live;**

 **I will sing praises to my God all my life long.**

Happy are those whose help and hope is in God,

 **Who made heaven, earth, the sea, and all that is in them.**

God keeps faith forever, and executes justice for the oppressed,

 **God gives food to the hungry, and sets the prisoners free.**

God will reign forever, for all generations.

 **Praise the Lord!**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

God of the People, the Oppressed, the Marginalized: we confess that we have often sided with the powerful. We have envied the wealthy. We have pursued worldly measures of success. We have neglected those around us in need, kept those on the margins from entering in and raised up oppressors as heroes. Forgive our faulty thinking and worldviews. Draw us back to You, O God. Help us to heed the warnings of the prophets. Help us to listen to the voices of the oppressed and powerless. Guide us to do justice, to love mercy, and to walk humbly with You. In the name of Christ, who calls us to become last of all and servant of all, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance

We are all made in the image of God, and we are all siblings in Christ. You are loved. You are forgiven and restored and holy and good. You are important to God and to us. You matter. Know that you are blessed, filled with the Spirit, and made to do good work in this world. You are a beautiful child of God. Amen.

Prayer

God of Being, You move through us and in us and beyond us, as Christ and Spirit and Creator. You call us into Being, into Life, and call us to life abundantly. You guide us in ways of Being that allow others to live, grow, and flourish. Release us from the burdens that hold us down, so we may move in all the ways You have called us to, in this dance of life. Amen.