Worship Resources for November 16th, 2014—Twenty-Third Sunday after Pentecost

Revised Common Lectionary: Judges 4:1-7 or Zephaniah 1:7, 12-18; Psalm 90:1-12 or Psalm 123; 1 Thessalonians 5:1-11; Matthew 25:14-30

Narrative Lectionary: Swords Into Plowshares, Isaiah 36:1-3, 13-20; 37:1-7; then 2:1-4 (Matthew 5:14)

As we near the end of our journey through the Hebrew Scriptures that began on Pentecost, we have followed the people of Israel as they grew from a family leaving their home for a new land, into a people who escaped from slavery into freedom and finally into the land promised their ancestors. Now, we skip ahead a few generations to the time of the Judges, when there was no king. In this chapter, we read that Deborah was the judge and prophetess of Israel, and that God is once again delivering them from their enemies, as God had promised. Even though they had done what was evil and not followed God’s ways, God still was faithful to them.

Our second thread follows the Prophets, and in Zephaniah, we again, like Amos last week, hear prophesy about the Day of the Lord. Judgment will fall on those who are complacent, who make no decision one way or another. As the people were taken into exile following poor political choices and ignoring the warnings of the prophets, so we see that the consequences of their own actions are perceived as God’s judgment. When we fail to act in the face of injustice, when injustice comes our way, this punishment is our own doing. We reap what we sew. And Zephaniah proclaimed that this would happen to his people, but this was a warning for the future: we live with the consequences of our actions, especially when we fail to act in light of injustice.

Portions of Psalm 90 were part of the Lectionary readings a few weeks ago at the end of October, and some overlap with today’s selection. Our concept of time is not the same as God’s—a thousand years can be like a day, a day like a thousand years—God can sweep them all away. In an instant life can be taken from us, so make every moment count.

Psalm 123 is a plea to God to have mercy—using both male and female imagery, the psalmist sings of looking up to God for deliverance, for the ones who could show them mercy, the ones who are at ease, are not. Only God can bring mercy and justice.

1 Thessalonians 5:1-11 speaks of the Day of the Lord coming like a thief in the night. The Day of the Lord, as told by the prophets, is the day of judgment, a day of reckoning. While we may have images of the world ending in flames, we see through the prophets a righting of what is wrong, a leveling out of unevenness. The hungry filled with good things and the rich sent away empty. Paul reminds those in the church in Thessalonica to be ready and prepared—to be children of light, in which there is nothing that would be shameful to hide in secret. To live in God’s ways means there will be nothing to be reckoned, for the day will come unexpectedly.

Matthew 25:14-30 contains Jesus’ Parable of the Talents. How do we use our resources and gifts—do we share them with others, using what God has given us to share the Good News of God’s Love—or do we believe there is only enough for ourselves, so we don’t share it? Do we believe in God’s abundance or the myth of scarcity? However, when I read this parable, sometimes I have great sympathy for the one who buried their talent, afraid of their harsh master. Perhaps we should not be so quick to judge on the surface level this parable, and instead remember that those who have more are called to share more, and that perhaps what we need to do is remove the shame and stigma from those who do not have enough.

The Narrative Lectionary begins with the tales in Isaiah of the conquest by Assyria of the kingdom of Israel and ends with the promise of peace. King Hezekiah prays for the remnant that will be left after the exile, for those that survive, and that someday, they will turn their weapons into farm tools and restore the land destroyed by war into a land of peace and bounty.

Matthew 5:14 declares that we are the light of the world. We have become the light that nations flock to, the light that can never be extinguished. For the prophets, Zion symbolized the light of the world, the new Jerusalem; but in the Gospels, the light of the world is Jesus, and then the people, who become the light of the world when we live out God’s ways and share the love of God. The prophet Jeremiah speaks of the new covenant being written on the hearts of people, and therefore we now have the light to share with others.

Judgment is about reconciling what is estranged, righting what is wrong, leveling out what has become uneven. For some, judgment is painful, hard to go through, difficult to admit where we have gone wrong and to turn back to God’s ways. It is hard for those who are used to having more than enough to have the extra taken away. But for those who have gone without, now they have enough. Now they have been restored. Now they have seen justice. When we use our gifts for God and share what we have with others, it cannot be taken away because it never belonged to us in the first place. But when we put ourselves first, when we think what we have been given belongs to only us, justice does not seem appealing, and judgment frightful.

Call to Worship

God is the Creator of the Heavens and Earth;

**God has made everything, and given it to us.**

Jesus is our Redeemer, our Savior, our Friend;

**Jesus has come to show us God’s love, and teaches us to love one another.**

The Holy Spirit moves in us, brings us together, and guides us in life;

**The Spirit reminds us that everything comes from God.**

Let us share in all of the good gifts of God:

**Let us worship our God together as one.**

Prayer of Brokenness/Confession

Eternal One, we confess that we are short-sighted. We put ourselves before others and are worried we don’t have enough, while others around us go without. We call ourselves religious, but fail to be concerned for justice for our neighbors. We fear losing what we have, rather than living into God’s ways and trusting in God’s love and justice. Forgive us for our fears that hold us back, from our assumptions that cause us to not see the needs around us, and for the times we miss the mark. Call us back into Your ways. In the name of Christ, our Redeemer and Friend, we pray. Amen.

Blessing/Assurance of Pardon

God is making all things new. When we repent and turn back to God, we are given a fresh start, a chance to do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God. Go and share the good news, and seek justice for all. Amen.

Prayer

Spirit of Life, You have called us away from the way of the world into the ways of Your righteousness. You call us to seek right-living so that others may live, justice so that the marginalized and the oppressed are lifted up and brought inside, mercy so that all may know Your love. You guide us into the ways of peace so that all might thrive, so that one will not overpower another, but that love will prevail. May those of us in power, may those of us with privilege look to lose so that others may gain. May those who are disenfranchised find strength in You, that their voice may be heard and that their calls for justice might be listened to and raised up. May we judge ourselves instead of others, so that we might turn our lives back to You and Your ways. In the name of Christ, our companion, our friend, our Savior, we pray. Amen.