

Sacredise Daily Worship

Personal Worship Resources for the Week:

11 - 17 December 2016

Thought for the Week:

Among the Lectionary readings this week we find a promise from Isaiah of God's restoration for God's people, Mary's song of faith and justice, John the Baptist's doubts about Jesus, and a call from James for the believers to be patient in suffering. What a fascinating mix! The message is clear, though. Doubts, struggles and suffering will come, but we have a choice about our response. We can allow our doubts to get the better of us and lead us to miss God's way, or we can affirm our faith, participate in God's mission, and allow hope, faith and joy to sustain us.

When we consider the great challenges we face during this Advent season, this week's message offers comfort and strength. On a personal level, many of us struggle to make ends meet, live in fear of losing our jobs, and face the temptation to do whatever it takes to survive in an unjust world. On a global level, the constant stream of news about wars, natural disasters, and the failure of leadership can tempt us to abandon hope and faith. But, as followers of Jesus we don't have the luxury of these responses. In the face of our internal doubts, and our external challenges, we are called to keep hope alive, and to continue to live with peace, generosity, and compassion. The truth is that when we do this, we don't only bring life to others. We find the best possible life for ourselves.

This week we explore staying hopeful and faithful in tough times.

Sunday 11 December 2016

Reading: Matthew 11:2-11

Reflection: When John expressed doubts about Jesus' ministry, Jesus didn't try to convince John of who he was. He simply instructed John's disciples to go back and tell him what they had seen. Jesus knew that his actions spoke for themselves – they were exactly what the Old Testament prophets had said the Messiah

would do. By pointing to his actions, Jesus gave John all the assurance he could need.

But, then Jesus made an enigmatic statement: "God blesses those who do not turn away because of me." Why would people turn away? Simply because Jesus wasn't the kind of Messiah they expected. Although his actions were messianic, he did not look like the national leader they had expected. Although many of his acts were remarkable, Jesus himself was incredibly understated and "normal". This "disconnect" with people's expectations caused many to struggle to accept Jesus as the Promised One.

When our faith and hope depend on God doing things the way we expect, we will always be disappointed. When we allow our doctrines, prejudices, or self-righteousness to blind us to the work of God in unexpected people and places, we miss out on God's life. That's why Jesus reminded the people about how surprising John himself had been when he began his ministry.

How can you open yourself to the surprising work of God today?

Practice for Today: When we become too comfortable in our routines and ideas, we easily miss God's unexpected work. But, when we open ourselves to the new – reading new books, doing new things, meeting new people – we experience God in new ways. Today, try something new as a spiritual practice.

Breath-Prayer for Today: God of surprises, I am amazed at all the new and surprising ways you find to love me, and all your children.

Monday 12 December 2016

Reading: Isaiah 29:17-24

Reflection: The prophet Isaiah knew how to connect with the hearts of his people. He knew they longed for prosperity and peace, to feel safe, and to connect with one another. As they faced threats of conquest, it was tempting to focus only on the destruction and injustice they were experiencing, and to forget the attitudes and actions that had brought them to this place. It was also tempting to believe that their problems were God's fault. That's why Isaiah did two things in his preaching. Firstly, he reminded the people of what they had done to bring upon themselves the consequences they

were experiencing. Secondly, he reminded them of God's presence, and gave them hope in God's dream of restoration and justice for God's people. We see both of these elements in today's reading.

In the beginning Isaiah speaks about the scoffers, the arrogant, the plotters of evil, and those who give false testimony. In final verses he speaks God's word to the "wayward" and the "complainers", and to those who have become ashamed by what they have done. All of these actions need to be confronted and changed. But, throughout this reading there is also the promise of abundance, and of a new order where all of these destructive behaviours are gone. The prophet's point is to contrast how the people have lived, and the consequences, with God's dream and its consequences, in the hopes that the people will turn to God's way. The same challenge applies to us today. We are all tempted to arrogance, expediency, scoffing, and complaining. But these things don't bring us - or anyone else - life. But God has a different dream, which, if we can embrace it, will lead us to live differently, and to experience the abundant life God wants for us.

How can you turn away from destructive attitudes and actions and live into God's ways today?

Practice for Today: Whenever we are faced with a contrast between human destructiveness and God's restoration the Scriptures are inviting us into the healing act of repentance. When we are willing to face the brokenness within us and choose differently, we can find healing and liberation. Make repentance a theme of your day.

Breath-Prayer for Today: When my ways contradict your ways, O God, forgive me, change me, and restore me.

Tuesday 13 December 2016

Reading: Jude 17-25

Reflection: The final verses of the short letter of Jude are probably the most important. Verse 24 reminds us that it is God who keeps us from falling and who brings us into God's glorious presence. The God who is worthy of all honour and glory is the one who works to sustain us and bring us into God's eternal life! Before we consider

our part in the Christian journey, we must remember this truth.

We must be careful not to apply the words about scoffers and ungodly desires beyond the author's intention. The writer is speaking about Christians who create division among Christ's followers. These people appear, from the context, to be caught up in the natural human tendency to cynicism and individualism, and it is their negative impact on the unity of God's people that the writer challenges. In response, the author calls the believers to build one another up, and to pray for God's Spirit to fill and sustain them all. Then, he instructs them to show mercy even to divisive members of the community, with the hope of drawing them back into relationship.

When life is hard and our faith is constantly challenged, we need each other to keep us strong and faithful. We need to resist the urge to withdraw into our own self-protective bunkers. Alone we are vulnerable, but together, we stand firm and share in God's life. How can you connect a little more deeply with your Christian sisters and brothers today?

Practice for Today: The act of gathering with others in worship is so simple that we may start to devalue its importance. But, when we gather, we remember that we are part of something much bigger than we are, and we learn to support and encourage each other. Today, try to gather with a few Christian friends, or at least make contact by phone or email to affirm your connection.

Breath-Prayer for Today: As I connect with your people, O God, I connect more deeply with you, and I find strength.

Wednesday 14 December 2016

Reading: Psalm 42

Reflection: When we face the kinds of doubts that John the Baptist had they can be overwhelming. When struggles rob us of joy and we feel uncertain about our well-being we can slip into darkness and despair more easily than we may have imagined. In itself, these dark times are not a problem. It's natural for us to go through cycles of emotions. We need both the ups and the downs for our emotional health. The issue is how we deal with the down times. Too often our response to doubts and despair is to turn away

from our faith and our friends in order to protect ourselves, or to turn inward on ourselves in anger or judgement. But, today's Psalm offers an alternative approach that leads to healing and that helps us to navigate the dark times.

Notice how the Psalmist acknowledges his longing for God, and his pain at the struggles he is facing. He does not bury his pain or try to hide it, but he doesn't wallow, either. Instead he challenges himself to remember God's presence and work even in the midst of his discouragement. He affirms again his faith in God's love and grace, and he pours out his longing and hurt to God. This is a really helpful way to handle our darkness. By expressing our grief and anger to God, we prevent ourselves from taking it out on those around us. By remembering God's presence and activity in our lives, we give ourselves hope that we will experience God's grace again. And even though this may not take away the darkness, it will help us to imagine the light and keep faith that it will shine on us again.

How can you keep faith alive in you and others during times of darkness?

Practice for Today: Today's Psalm is a beautiful example of a lament. It expresses grief to God, it acknowledges the pain of the writer, but it also praises God for God's grace and sustenance. Today, use this Psalm as a guide to help you in your own lament for yourself, for someone you love, or for our world.

Breath-Prayer for Today: Even when I am discouraged, O God, I place my hope in you.

Thursday 15 December 2016

Reading: Galatians 3:23-29

Reflection: It is a normal - albeit unhelpful - response, when we face crises or threats, to seek security in clear definitions of right and wrong, and of who is "in" and who is "out". This always leads to legalism, followed by harsh judgement on those who fail to abide by our rules. This was the case with the Galatian Church. In the time of the Apostle Paul, one of the great criticisms of the church was that they had abandoned the law. In one sense this was true, because followers of Jesus believed the law had been fulfilled, and now Jews

and Gentiles could come together in a new community in Christ. However, the result of this criticism was that the church was severely persecuted. Naturally, in response, some of the believers fell back on the law as their security. They began to hold the Gentiles to the law's requirements and they began preaching that it was only possible to be Christian if a person followed the law as well.

But, Paul called the believers back to faith in God's grace. The law had its place, until grace came and fulfilled the law in Christ, setting us free to live by a different standard. Notice, though, that the different standard is not a free-for-all in which anything goes. Rather, it is the standard of love and grace in which everyone belongs, and in which we are called to cross the boundary lines of race, gender, sexuality, class and power factions. Even though we may be challenged for associating with people that others reject, even though we may face criticism or persecution because we won't play by the legalistic rules of our society, we are called to the freedom and responsibility of love for all - even those who persecute us. Once we recognise that all are one and welcomed in Christ, we find our security in radical love rather than in the law and its divisions.

How can you find your security in love today?

Practice for Today: When we approach another person with words of self-protection, or disinterest, the relationship easily turns cold or hostile. But, if we approach another with words of blessing or welcome - even if they are hostile toward us - the relationship often becomes more open and friendly. This is why our worship teaches us to speak words of blessing (benediction) over one another. Today, try to speak words of benediction over everyone you encounter.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May my words be a benediction that brings life and joy to everyone around me, O God.

Friday 16 December 2016

Reading: 2 Samuel 7:18-22

Reflection: On Sunday, we read about the birth of Jesus. But today, as we prepare our hearts for the Christmas celebration, we are

reminded that the coming of Christ in the flesh was no “Plan B” for God. Rather it was the fulfilment of a dream God had nurtured from the very beginning - the dream of a new world of peace, justice, love, joy and abundance. The birth of Jesus was about bringing the reality of this dream into being among us, and calling us to learn to live according to God’s new way.

But, when we are called to something so new, it can be hard to imagine what it looks like. That’s why the biblical writers often refer to King David. David was not a perfect man, nor a perfect king. He made a lot of mistakes, and hurt a lot of people. But, he tried to remain in submission to God, and he sought to rule his people with justice and bring prosperity and security to all. Because of this, the reign of David was often remembered as a high point in the history of Israel.

But, David’s reign was just a glimpse of what the rule of God is like. God promised David that there would always be one of his descendants on the throne of Israel, and that David’s house (or dynasty) would last forever. Jesus is seen by the biblical writers as the fulfilment of that promise. Jesus established God’s Reign among us - a realm of peace and justice, of love and grace, right here in the midst of our world of conflict and division. Now God calls us to live by Jesus’ example and teachings. When we do this, we are part of the fulfilment of God’s promise to David.

How can you live as a citizen of this eternal realm today?

Practice for Today: One of the features of David’s reign was his celebration of God’s goodness and glory. Though he was king, David always remembered that there was another King who had authority over him, and he regularly offered praise for God’s gracious rule over his life. Today, allow your praises to remind you that God is your Ruler, and to lead you to live in honour of God.

Breath-Prayer for Today: I praise and honour you, O God, not just with my words, but with the way I live my life.

Saturday 17 December 2016

Reading: John 3:31-36

Reflection: Today’s reading comes immediately after John’s

disciples report to him that people were going to be baptised by Jesus instead of by John. John responds with the amazing affirmation: “I must become less and he must become greater”. Today’s verses flow out of this speech of John’s but it is not clear that it is John who is speaking. It may be that the Gospel writer steps in to challenge his readers on how they (and we) will respond to Jesus, after seeing John’s response.

The claims of this passage are radical. Jesus has come from heaven, speaks of what he has seen and heard, but few believe him. Those who do believe, receive God’s eternal life (or the “life of that age” referring to the age of God’s Reign). Those who don’t do not receive that life and are under the consequence of “God’s judgement” or wrath, which simply means that everything that is not part of God’s Reign inevitably brings destruction into the world. The question we must answer is where we stand in relation to this Jesus and his mission of God’s Reign. If Jesus really is “God with us” then it is through Jesus that we enter into God’s life. And Jesus’ way challenges us because it goes against everything that our world - especially at self-indulgent times like this - tells us will bring life.

How can you celebrate Jesus by embracing his way of life a little more intentionally today?

Practice for Today: Remembering the radical message of Jesus is not meant to rob us of the joy and gift giving of this season. It’s simply meant to help us to celebrate in the healthiest, most life-giving way. That means that as we spend time with loved ones and share our gifts, we can also remember and pray for those who grieve and are in need, and even serve them in some small way. Try to reflect the life of Jesus through prayer and service today.

Breath-Prayer for Today: May your Reign of justice and peace, which came to us through Jesus, be reflected in me today, O God.

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