

Sermon and worship ideas for World Refugee Day Sunday, 20 June 2021

The lectionary readings for Refugee Sunday, June 20, 2021, offer us a wealth of material from which to fashion worship experiences and sermons.

We have the literal David and Goliath story – the tiny against the mighty. We have Psalms that give us a glimpse of a world of radical welcome and unity. We have an Epistle that tells us the truth about the struggle for justice and righteousness. And we have a gospel reading that speaks to our fear in the midst of great change.

1 Samuel 17:(1a, 4-11, 19-23), 32-49

In this violent and bloody story, the contrasts are many and stark. High-tech weapons vs. a shepherd's sling. A giant of a man vs. a slip of a boy. An army filled with fear vs. one filled with bravado. God, the story tells us does not need the weapons of war to achieve God's ends nor a huge army. What God needs is faithful individuals.

If we strip away the horror and the violence of this story, we can find a message for our time. Just as David uses the ordinary things of his life and work to defeat the enemy rather than the weapons that were urged upon him, so we already have within us and among us the tools we need to work for and call for justice in our place and time.

Psalm 9:9-20

This is a song of the oppressed. This small nation, often crushed between rival superpowers knows what it is like to be powerless in the face of international machinations beyond their control. Here the cry goes up that the people are to be faithful to their God. This God is not distant but lives among them (verse 11). The text also tells the faithful that God will not let the nations triumph forever, 'the needy shall not always be forgotten, nor the hope of the poor perish forever.' This is the hope that is behind the famous quote from Martin Luther King 'The arc of the moral universe is long, but it bends toward justice.' King developed that phrase from a sermon delivered in 1853 by the American abolitionist minister Theodore Parker. Parker said, 'I do not pretend to understand the moral universe. The arc is a long one. My eye reaches but little ways. I cannot calculate the curve and complete the figure by experience of sight. I can divine it by conscience. And from what I see I am sure it bends toward justice.'

King's oft quoted phrase could be taken to mean that there is little for us to do, that the bending will just happen by itself. This is of course not what King meant – his whole life demonstrated that. The fuller quote from Parker invites us to think and to work in tandem with that bending moral arc.

Psalm 133

This tiny jewel of a Psalm offers us a vision of the kind of abundance that Jesus speaks of in John 10:10. The oil that anoints, that sets someone apart flows with abandonment and extravagance. This Psalm is a glimpse of the world as God calls for it to be; a place of grace upon grace (John 1:16). This is the world we hold before us as we pray and work for and with newly arrived people.

Job 38:1-11

This short reading begins God's response to Job and his friends. The text has God responding by reminding Job and us that the world came into being in ways that are beyond our knowledge and that God is firmly in control of God's world.

For an ancient people who were at the mercy of an environment they little understood and for modern people who cannot, thanks to human-induced climate change, be at all sure that our knowledge is sufficient to stave off disaster, what does it mean to believe that God oversees God's creation?

Psalm 107:1-3, 23-32

Many of those still being cruelly treated by our government are so because they arrived on this continent by boat. This Psalm deals with the real dangers of the ocean but it also is clear that in all those dangers, God, the creator of the sea does not leave people alone in their distress.

This Psalm would make a wonderful call and response reading. You could have the congregation repeat verse one after a leader reads each of the other verses.

2 Corinthians 6:1-13

This is a letter of urgency. Now is the 'now is the acceptable time; see, now is the day of salvation!' One of the most debilitating positions people can take on issues of justice is to agree wholeheartedly with the need for action but to say that, for one reason or another, now is not the opportune time. Counselling patience is easy for the person not living with injustice and oppression. Many people have agreed that incarcerating people in on and offshore detention is bad for them and for our nation. Some of these same people have, for, they say, reasons of national security, called for incarcerations to be continued – for justice to be delayed. This is not the call of this text.

Mark 4:35-41

'Let us go across to the other side.' That's what this text is about. It's what Jesus is always on about with this disciples. He is constantly calling them to move, to go with him, physically and spiritually. The 'other side' is always where Jesus is heading. Love you friends? Yes. But there is the other side: Love you enemies! (See Luke 6 and Matthew 5). Forgive? Of course. But there is the other side: Forgive continually. (See Matthew 18).

For Jesus's disciples, the other side was always a long way from where they were. And the journey was not trouble free. At times they thought the journey was so fraught, so costly that they would die. And, as we know from the scriptures and tradition, many of them, having begun to experience more and more of the liberation and joy of the other side, did just that.

The other side to which God calls us also seems a long way from where we are. Treating people with dignity, care and respect? Of course! That is the Australian way. But there is the other side. We are called to care for the widow, the orphan and the stranger or alien at our door. The other side means radical, uncomfortable, unwavering welcome. It means we must face the truth about ourselves as individuals and as a nation. It means we must realise that racism, xenophobia and fear have guided much of our collective decision making in relation to those seeking refuge on our shores. It means knowing that even in the recent federal budget our government, with our tacit approval is continuing to make it even harder for refugee and asylum seekers in our community.

The other side to which Jesus called his disciples and to which God calls us is glimpsed in our Psalm readings for this week. The journey to the other side it spelt out here in Mark. It will be difficult. Traveling always is. It requires us to give up what we know and head into what we don't know. It will be unsettling and often dangerous, and we will need to have faith from which will come courage (verse 40). In starting out to the other side, what will we need to take with us in our church life? What will we need to abandon as no longer of value?

Some prayer ideas for Refugee Sunday:

Opening prayer

Restless God, we know that you never rest in your love and concern for all of creation. We know that you ceaselessly search us out, calling us to be here together in prayer and song and word. We know that you do not rest until justice rains down on the earth and until mercy flows like a river.

We are your people, your community, your family.
Today we open ourselves to your restless Spirit,
God of all creation we live in expectation of your work in our lives.
Amen

Prayer of Confession

Truth telling and truth giving God,
we confess that very often we hide from truth.
You call us to stand straight and tall in the sunlight,
when we would prefer to crouch and stumble in the dark.
You call us to open our eyes wide and to see your world
as it truly is, in all its complexity and confusion,
all its shades of good and bad,
when we, all too often prefer black and white categories
and simple explanations.
We confess that we often know you are calling us
in the big and small moments of our day
and yet we live as if this were not true,
as if you were not offering us abundant life in every moment.
Forgive us God for preferring a quiet life to a full life,
a half-truth to the full truth of your love for us and all creation.
Amen.

Words of Assurance

Sisters and brother, friends of God. Do not despair, you are precious to God and God never tires of calling and inviting you into the full life God has in store for us all. Rejoice! You are called! Rejoice! You are loved!

Prayer of Intercession

God, we know you call us to go with you to the other side.
You call us to a world larger, more open and more loving than we can ever imagine.
You call us to live in radical community with you and with each other.
You call us to a bigger version of ourselves than we have the courage to live

or the imagination to picture.

You call us to be one great family of all humanity.

Today we pray for all those in our community who do not know themselves called, who do not experience themselves as being worthy of being called by anyone for any reason.

Today we pray for all of those who truly wonder if life can have a meaning and a purpose, those who are sure that if it does, it does not include them.

We pray today for all who feel that they are on the outside looking in on community, those who can find no way and no reason to participate.

We pray also for all of those who we have intentionally excluded, all who have come to this land seeking refuge and safety whom we have locked up, and treated harshly, unjustly and illegally.

We pray that they will receive justice.

God we pray for a world of radical inclusion, a home for all.

And we pray in the name of the great includer, Jesus.

Amen.

Benediction

They left their nets and followed Jesus.

They left their boats and went with him.

Today God call us into new life, into a new world.

We are called by God.

Go now to hear and experience that call,

moment by moment,

thought by thought.

And we will know ourselves transformed.

Acknowledgement

Rev Paul Turley is Minister at Clayton Wesley Uniting Church and serves on the Synod Refugee Advocacy Group and has put together these worship resources for congregational uses for which we are grateful.