

Common Worship in Separate Places
For the people of Elmwood Avenue Presbyterian Church
London, Ontario
and their friends

The 1st Sunday of Advent
28 November 2021

To cross the threshold into worship, light a candle and keep a moment of silence.

Opening Words

L: The light shines in the darkness,

P: and the darkness has not overcome it.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, you make all the ages a preparation for the coming of your Son. Your prophets foretold him, and in the fullness of time he came according to your word; born of a woman that he might take our nature and share our humanity. Prepare our hearts to receive him when he comes, for he is Lord forever.

Loving Lord, your mercy reaches deep down into the darkness of the earth. Let it enter the cold places of our hearts. Cast the clear light of your judgment upon us, but warm our hearts with your mercy. Deliver us from all that would hinder us from receiving Christ with joy when he comes.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, give us grace to cast away the works of darkness and put on the armour of light, now in the time of this mortal life in which your Son Jesus Christ came to us in great humility, that on the last day, when he shall come again in glorious majesty to judge the living and the dead, we may rise to the life eternal; through him who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "God sent the Son into the world, not to condemn the world, but that the world might be saved through him." May God grant us pardon, true repentance, and bring us to eternal life.

P: May the peace of Christ be with us all.

Prayer for Illumination Lord of all, by whose command time runs its course; as we await the fulfilment of your promise, grant us hope in the hearing of your Word; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 25: 1-7 (*A prayer for guidance and deliverance*)

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
 O my God, in you I trust;
 do not let me be put to shame;
 do not let my enemies exult over me.
 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
 let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
 teach me your paths.
 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
 for you are the God of my salvation;
 for you I wait all day long.
 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
 for they have been from of old.
 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
 according to your steadfast love remember me,
 for your goodness' sake, O Lord!

(Said together) **Glory be to the Father, and to the Son, and to the Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now and ever shall be, world without end. Amen**

A Reading for the Day

St Luke 21: 25-36 (*Jesus speaks of his coming at the end of the age.*)

'There will be signs in the sun, the moon, and the stars, and on the earth distress among nations confused by the roaring of the sea and the waves. People will faint from fear and foreboding of what is coming upon the world, for the powers of the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see "the Son of Man coming in a cloud" with power and great glory. Now when these things begin to take place, stand up and raise your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.'

Then he told them a parable: 'Look at the fig tree and all the trees; as soon as they sprout leaves you can see for yourselves and know that summer is already near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that the kingdom of God is near.

'Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

'Be on guard so that your hearts are not weighed down with dissipation and drunkenness and the worries of this life, and that day does not catch you unexpectedly, like a trap. For it will come upon all who live on the face of the whole earth. 'Be alert at all times, praying that you may have the strength to escape all these things that will take place, and to stand before the Son of Man.'

L: This is the Gospel of the Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 21:28 "...stand up, raise your heads, your redemption is drawing near."

Something inside us loves a good disaster movie: floods and fire, earthquake and hurricane, 'explosion and chaos and ruin – oh my!' Our hearts race a bit faster. Our palms get a bit sweaty. That's our 'fight or flight' response kicking in.

But it's not *fear* we feel, not really. It's stimulated delight in *simulated* fear, the kind we feel on a rollercoaster ride, all scary but safe. Knowing it's 'not real', we munch our popcorn and cheer for the hero. We *know* he'll rescue the 'good' people, the bad guys will die a horrible death, and everything will be happy-ever-after. There's comfort in this. Something inside us wants to face what we fear. We want to rehearse our *own* heroic response to life's cruel disasters, too, but vicariously, through the hero's flashy story splayed on a big screen.

Mind you, when disaster unfolds on the *small* screen, in the nightly news, it may get too close for comfort. "Viewers may find these images disturbing," the news anchor warns. Still, we can't look away. We're hard-wired, neurologically, to pay attention to these stories too, to gather ourselves together to face them or to flee them, lest they happen to us too.

Twenty years ago, on September 11, every eye on the planet watched the World Trade Centre collapse into twisted, smoking rubble. Everything stopped that day. We couldn't *not* behold it as it happened. Something shifted in the deep-down structure of our world that day. We still feel its after-effects. The pre-Covid world has fallen apart too. Not only has this virus killed millions; it has torn a hole in the fabric of the economy, turned our politics in an authoritarian direction, and damaged our social and psychological lives in ways we haven't even *begun* to fathom.

It happens on a small scale too. Each person's life is a little, ordered world with its own life and meaning. But disaster strikes at that level too: job losses, marriage breakdowns, disease, accident, and sudden death. Our lives tremble and shake when these happen. They can happen in an instant, explosively; but they can happen slowly, too, through a long process of disintegration and decay. Maybe we stopped caring, stopped paying attention to our relationships, our work, our health and well-being. We let things slide. Then one day they slid away forever.

Even a sudden happiness can undo us. A windfall of money turns the lives of lottery winners upside down. They're never the same again. And how many love songs celebrate the disintegrating earthquake of a lovers' life? Here's one:

*...my hands are shaky, and my knees are weak
I can't seem to stand on my own two feet.
Who do you thank when you have such luck?
I'm in love. I'm all shook up.*

(So sang one of America's best-known poets. Can't remember his name right now.)

Then there's the biggest world of all, the one we all belong to, the one we can never escape, the one we need like air and water. *Nature* nurtures us. Nature kills us too. There's terror in nature's beauty and beauty in its terror. People in beautiful British Columbia fled from those epic forest fires last summer. Now they're suffering once-in-a-century floods, though they're more likely once-a-decade now. Vancouverites don't want to hear that they've built their lives on an earthquake zone. But they have.

Haven't we all, though, in one way or another? We put planning and energy into all these little systems we depend upon. That's what humans do. We're good at it. Each system is a little, ordered world – private life, work life, social life, political life, and all the institutions that house them. When the whole thing works well, each one is integrated with all the others. They hum together like the parts of a smooth machine. I turn the tap and out flows water. I flick the switch and shout, 'Let there be light!' Hospitals, schools, traffic lights, a safe financial system, good laws justly enforced, and all the benefits of 'peace, order, and good government' – this the world we've carefully built and built our lives upon. But it's an earthquake zone. It can all shake into pieces.

Jesus' vivid language about the heavens shaking, the sea roaring, and people fainting from fear and foreboding, isn't a movie script. Neither is it a literal description of what will happen, to the letter, with a precise date attached. It's not *that*. It's not that at all.

What then? It's a stark reminder that wherever there's order, there's a potential for disorder. Worlds can fall apart, and they do. They will. What do we do then?

"Look for the Son of Man, coming in the clouds with power and great glory," says Jesus. But what good would that do? And what does he mean by it?

He means something like this. The Son of Man is the one whose life has been lit up and lifted up, energised by the power of God. *Jesus* is the Son of Man, in other

words. He's not splashed across a movie screen. He's a man of sorrows, acquainted with grief, who bears our sins, fears, sorrows – even our own world-ending death. He's the living symbol of God's power to redeem and renew all things. We see this on display in the drama of our salvation – the rollercoaster ride of sin and death, his epic story of love and salvation that we come *here* to rehearse, so that we can learn to play *our* true role in the living drama that is our own lives.

When the world falls apart and your life collapses into crisis, he says, don't collapse with it. Don't *you* fall apart too. Stand up, raise your head, face the turmoil. Because light won't come from a different place than the darkness. The light shines *in* the darkness, remember? So, when the world disintegrates, don't you disintegrate too, he says. Remember Kipling's poem?

*If you can keep your head when all about you
Are losing theirs and blaming it on you,
If you can trust yourself when all men doubt you,
But make allowance for their doubting too....and so on.*

In other words, 'keep it together', keep your integrity, stay whole. And for God's sake don't give up.

Why? Because your redemption is drawing near, says Jesus. In fact, your redemption will come alive in *you* when you 'stand in the place where you live', when you 'lift up your hearts' (as we say at every communion service), when you square yourself to face what you fear. That way lies redemption. The power and great glory that we see in the Son of Man will come alive in us too. This is what he promises. This is our salvation.

We carry it within ourselves, even now, like a precious treasure rescued from a burning house before it collapses. It's the green leaf of new life that the dove brought to Noah to signify the end of a world-ending flood. It's the fig leaf that signifies the advent of summer's fruitful realm, as Jesus says.

It is, of course, our faith. All you need to do, says R.S. Thomas – that brilliant poet and grumpy clergyman – all you need to do

*..[is] present yourself with
Your need only, and the simple offering
Of your faith, green as a leaf.*

Prayers of Intercession

God of justice and peace, from the heavens you rain down mercy and kindness. Lift up our heads in expectation of your coming, and call forth our praise of you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the whole Church of Christ, especially today for your Church both gathered and scattered by the pandemic. O Lord, we are few, we are troubled, and we battle despair. Open our eyes to your presence and renew our hope. Save your Church from worshipping itself, from failing to love each other. Keep our hearts open to the pain of the world around us.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are desperately ill, for those who fear that they may soon fall ill, and for those who fear spreading their illness to others.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for home and family life, in all its variety, wherever it may be found. God our Father, you sent your Son Jesus Christ to live in an earthly home. Help us to treasure those with whom we live. Bless those who are far from us, wherever they may be. Keep them from danger and return them to us safely.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for places marred by violence and hatred. Hasten the advent of that day when the sound of war will forever be silenced, the darkness of evil scattered, and all your children gathered into your peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, we pray for those who feel no joy today, whose lives feel lifeless; for those who carry impossible burdens of guilt and regret; for those who are dying and those who would prefer to die. Invade their despair. Lift them from feelings of futility. Let them know your purpose for them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering the communion of saints, and with hope for this life and the next, we keep a time of silence in God's presence....*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord Jesus Christ, the world awaits you. In the longing of the persecuted for justice; in the longing of the poor for prosperity; in the longing of the privileged for riches greater than wealth; in the longing of our own hearts for a better life, we also long for you. Come, O Lord, Emmanuel.

As our Saviour Christ has taught us, so we pray:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name; thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our

debts, as we forgive our debtors. And lead us not into temptation but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, the power and the glory, forever. *Amen*

Benediction

(Said together) The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us all, now and forever. *Amen*