

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

The 19th Sunday after Pentecost
3 October 2021

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

Opening Words

L: God is love, and those who abide in love abide in God.

P: And God abides in them.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hidden; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, for we come to worship and adore you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful God, we confess that we have sinned against you in thought, word and deed. We have not loved you with our whole heart and mind and strength; we have not loved our neighbours as ourselves. In your mercy, forgive what we have been, help us amend what we are, and direct what we shall be, so that we may delight in your will and walk in your ways, to the glory of your holy name.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious God, the rock of our salvation, deepen the faith you have bestowed in your Church, and let its power be seen in us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." 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 Help us, O God, to listen for your Word with an eager faith, a lively hope, and with love that opens into knowledge; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 26 (*A plea for God's justice*)

Vindicate me, O Lord,
 for I have walked in my integrity,
 and I have trusted in the Lord without wavering.
 Prove me, O Lord, and try me; test my heart and mind.
 For your steadfast love is before my eyes,
 and I walk in faithfulness to you.
 I do not sit with the worthless,
 nor do I consort with hypocrites;
 I hate the company of evildoers,
 and will not sit with the wicked.
 I wash my hands in innocence,
 and go around your altar, O Lord,
 singing aloud a song of thanksgiving,
 and telling all your wondrous deeds.
 O Lord, I love the house in which you dwell,
 and the place where your glory abides.
 Do not sweep me away with sinners,
 nor my life with the bloodthirsty,
 those in whose hands are evil devices,
 and whose right hands are full of bribes.
 But as for me, I walk in my integrity;
 redeem me, and be gracious to me.
 My foot stands on level ground;
 in the great congregation I will bless the 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

Job 1:1, 2: 1-10 (*The beginning of the suffering of Job*)

There was once a man in the land of Uz whose name was Job. That man was blameless and upright, one who feared God and turned away from evil.

One day the heavenly beings came to present themselves before the Lord, and Satan also came among them to present himself before the Lord.

The Lord said to Satan, 'Where have you come from?'

Satan answered the Lord, 'From going to and fro on the earth, and from walking up and down on it.'

The Lord said to Satan, 'Have you considered my servant Job? There is no one like him on the earth, a blameless and upright man who fears God and turns away from evil. He still persists in his integrity, although you incited me against him, to destroy him for no reason.'

Then Satan answered the Lord, 'Skin for skin! All that people have they will give to save their lives. But stretch out your hand now and touch his bone and his flesh, and he will curse you to your face.'

The Lord said to Satan, 'Very well, he is in your power; only spare his life.'

So Satan went out from the presence of the Lord, and inflicted loathsome sores on Job from the sole of his foot to the crown of his head.

Job took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.

Then his wife said to him, 'Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.'

But he said to her, 'You speak as any foolish woman would speak. Shall we receive the good at the hand of God, and not receive the bad?'

In all this Job did not sin with his lips.

L: This is the Word of the Lord

P: Thanks be to God.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Job 2:9 *"Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God and die."*

Job's wife says this to him. "What happened to you is utterly unfair. Our money is gone, and our children are dead. Look at you. You're perched like a rat on an ash heap, weeping sores cover your body, and you have a thundering case of halitosis. You don't deserve this. Neither do I. God is a monster. Curse God and die," she says.

Job answers in the way a rabbi would, with a question: "Shall we receive the good at the hand of God and *not* receive the bad?" Good question! We *do* take the good with the bad, don't we? That annoying phrase, 'it's all good', is a lie. It's *not* all good. But *are* they both from the hand of God, the good *and* the bad?

"Why do bad things happen to good people?" The Book of Job never answers this unanswerable question, beloved by barstool barristers and armchair philosophers. The Book of Job aims at a *practical* question – not 'why' but 'how'. *How* can we live with integrity in the face of cruel suffering, the kind that makes us cry, "Why me?" and "I don't deserve this." When we face *that* kind of suffering, when we feel the pain of it and

see it in others, can we still speak *well* of God, or should we not curse God, turn our face to the wall, and wait for death to come? Can we speak of God at *all* anymore?

Stephen Fry, an Englishman of letters and all-round funny man, was asked, "You walk up to the pearly gates, and you're confronted by God. What would you say?"

Here's his answer: "I'd say, 'Bone cancer in children? What's that about? How dare you create a world where there's such misery that's not our fault. It's not right. Why should I respect a capricious, mean-minded god who creates a world so full of injustice and pain?' *That's* what I'd say..." – he said.

To which Rowan Williams said, "Religious people are way ahead of him. His anger is already uttered in the Psalms." He went on. "I cherish hope that, if he met God, Stephen Fry would feel compelled not just to get his anger off his chest but also wait for God's *reply*." That's what angry Job wants too. God's reply.

Now, remember that Job is a folk tale, and a profound work of the imagination – profound because it captures the truth about this earthly life. But it begins in a heavenly realm of angelic beings – one of them called 'Satan'. Satan isn't a name; it's a job title. It means 'adversary'. There's some Jewish humour here. Even in heaven, it seems, there's a Woody Allen, or maybe a Larry David, some bloke who won't play along, who even says to God, 'Do you wanna bet?'

"I'll *bet* I can get Job to curse you," says Satan. "Sure, he praises you *now*. He's healthy. He's wealthy. Let me afflict him. *Then* he'll curse you. *You'll* see."

"Job?" says God. "No way. Not Job. He's my best guy down there. You're on."

And – (spoiler alert) – Job never does curse God. He guards the integrity his wife disparaged. Mind you, he walks right up to the edge of cursing God. He leans over, but he does not leap. Instead, he weeps hot tears and whines with self-pity. He shouts at God with red hot anger. He demands to know *why* this is happening to him – as though, if we only knew why, that would make our sorrow better. Would it, though?

Job's wife believes that hoisting a middle finger at God, followed by a medically assisted death, is a brave show of defiance. "Take *that*, God!" But Job doesn't want any of that. He wishes he'd never been born, yes. But he *was* born. He accepts this. And though inexplicable suffering afflicts him, he resolves to do one last worthwhile thing with his life. He'll cajole, plead, and *demand* a meeting with God, to make his case before God – and more, to make God put his case to *him*. He wants to put God on trial. This sounds impious, but isn't it more faithful than giving up or giving in?

In extremis, some atheists *do* give in. They fall into a foxhole of suffering, they curse, they reach out, and the God they'd declared 'non-existent' and 'not worth the effort' grabs hold of them. On the other hand, some people of faith turn their back on God the moment they land on life's ash heap. God broke the contract they *thought* they had with him. Which of those would *we* be, I wonder? We can't know unless and until we've been tested as Job was, can we? Perhaps some of us have.

Here's the point: 'Faith' and 'grace' are not jagged little happy pills we have to swallow whole. Nor are they enemies to our freedom and flourishing and powers of reason, forces that the 'brave, atheist mind' must curse and denounce. No, faith and grace are aspects of a relationship with God. Faith is our life-long response to the astonishing gift of grace that was always, already *there*.

A life that enjoys *some* measure of integrity and wholeness (and those are words for 'salvation') is a life spent trying to be aware of that relationship, to be true to it and to live by it. But like Job's marriage – like all real relationships – it will have conflict and argument in it, not just sweetness and joy. Even God's heavenly court has a Larry David who's bent on curbing everyone's enthusiasm, the adversary who says, "I think you're wrong, Lord." God seems to welcome this. *It makes faith real. It gives it a purchase.* God re-named Jacob 'Israel' because Jacob *wrestled* with the angel. Jacob refused to let him go without a blessing. And forever after, the word "Israel" names those who 'struggle with God' and do not let him go, not even in times of trouble. They find life's blessing *there*.

So, here's a story, one of many that emerged from the Holocaust (the most horrific terror we can possibly imagine). At Auschwitz, on the night before they were gassed and burned and turned into an ash heap, a group of rabbis asked each other, "Has God failed us? Has God let go of Israel? Has God broken the covenant with us?"

They decided to put God on trial, there and then. They appointed a judge, a jury, a prosecution, and a defence. They heard all the evidence they could muster. They quoted from all the holy books which they knew off by heart. And they reached a verdict. "Yes, God is guilty."

It's unthinkable that rabbis should ever say this – "God is guilty" – but their plight was more unthinkable still, and they wept all over again. But then, one of them noticed the sun was about to go down. He said, "Brothers, the Sabbath!" So, they gathered in a circle, they lit a candle, and they chanted their praise to God.

Prayers of Intercession

We offer prayer to God the Father, through the Son, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ, for the life and the unity of the Church. Grant us always to acknowledge the lordship of your Son Jesus Christ; keep your Church free from needless quarrel and strife. Help us to live in love and unity with all who have been baptised in his name.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for a greater reverence for the life that teems in all creation. Eternal God, in all life you live, the true life of all; give us that love for all living things which befits those who believe in you, lest we despise, degrade, or callously destroy your gift. Rather, help us to save and steward it according to your will

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Eternal God, your Son Jesus Christ bore our griefs and carried our sorrows. Because it would cheer his heart, we remember before you those who are sick, full of sadness, and suffering from any kind of distress. Behold those who are dying, and be near them as their life draws to a close. Uphold their faith, that they may trust and not be afraid.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who lead others in Church and Society. Fill them with a desire to serve and a love for justice. And save us, who ask so much of those who lead us, from requiring of them virtues we do not practise ourselves.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, we acknowledge the slenderness of the thread which separates life from death, and suddenness with which it can break. We remember with sorrow the children who died in Residential Schools. Remembering now the whole communion of saints, and with gratitude for those we have loved, who have died, we keep silence in your presence...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Mighty God, whose Word we trust, whose Spirit prays in our prayers: accept our prayers this day, and further those which will bring your peace for the earth; through Jesus Christ our Lord, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be all glory and praise, world without end.

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**