

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

*The 1st Sunday of Advent  
29 November 2020*

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

*Opening Words*

L: Salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

**P: The night is far gone and day is at hand.**

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 hinders us from receiving Christ with joy when he comes, that we may serve you with undivided hearts.

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*** Sovereign Lord, by whose command time runs its course; as we await the fulfilment of your promises, grant us hope through the hearing of your Word; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

***The Psalm for the Day***

**Psalm 80: 1-7, 17-19** (*A Prayer for Israel's Restoration*)

Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel,  
 you who lead Joseph like a flock!  
 You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth  
 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh.  
 Stir up your might,  
 and come to save us!  
 Restore us, O God;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
 O Lord God of hosts,  
 how long will you be angry with your people's prayers?  
 You have fed them with the bread of tears,  
 and given them tears to drink in full measure.  
 You make us the scorn of our neighbours;  
 our enemies laugh among themselves.  
 Restore us, O God of hosts;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.  
 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand,  
 the one whom you made strong for yourself.  
 Then we will never turn back from you;  
 give us life, and we will call on your name.  
 Restore us, O Lord God of hosts;  
 let your face shine, that we may be saved.

*(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 Mark 13: 24-47** (*Jesus speaks about the end of all things*)

Jesus said: But in those days, after that suffering, the sun will be darkened, and the moon will not give its light, and the stars will be falling from heaven, and the

powers in the heavens will be shaken. Then they will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory. Then he will send out the angels, and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth to the ends of heaven.

From the fig tree learn its lesson: as soon as its branch becomes tender and puts forth its leaves, you know that summer is near. So also, when you see these things taking place, you know that he is near, at the very gates. Truly I tell you, this generation will not pass away until all these things have taken place. Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will not pass away.

But about that day or hour no one knows, neither the angels in heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. Beware, keep alert; for you do not know when the time will come. It is like a man going on a journey, when he leaves home and puts his slaves in charge, each with his work, and commands the doorkeeper to be on the watch.

Therefore, keep awake—for you do not know when the master of the house will come, in the evening, or at midnight, or at cockcrow, or at dawn, or else he may find you asleep when he comes suddenly. And what I say to you I say to all: Keep awake.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen the Lord.

**P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.**

### *Some thoughts on the Reading*

**St Mark 13:32** *About that day or hour no one knows.*

Advent draws us deeper into the dark and cold of winter, but closer to the light that shines in its darkness.

As his own life draws to its close, Jesus, who is that light, speaks of the end of everything. It's cosmic and catastrophic. "The sun will grow dark, the moon will give no light, the stars will fall from heaven," he says. But Israel's prophets talked this way too, using the license granted them by poetry. They'd cry out to God as we do, in moments of quiet desperation. Only, they were never quiet about it. Isaiah shouts. "O that you would tear open the heavens and come down! Let mountains quake at your presence!" In other words, bring the 'world' – meaning, bring 'this sordid state of affairs', this 'national mess' – to an end.

Tearing up the heavens. The end of the world as we know it. This kind of talk reminds me of modern-day astronomers. My brother is one. I asked him, "How will the world end, with a bang or a whimper?" He sighed and said, "It's an event so remote in time it shouldn't concern the likes of you. But if you must know, billions of years from now the sun will consume the earth when it grows into a *red giant*." I said, "Not a jolly green one?" But scientists can't stand it when clergy tease them for using language that's just as poetic as the Bible's is. "A red giant."

Scientists may answer the ‘how’ and ‘when’ of things, but they’ll never answer ‘why’. In *A Child’s Christmas in Wales*, the poet Dylan Thomas remembers receiving such ‘useful presents’ (children dislike the useful ones, don’t they?) as “books that told me everything about the wasp, except why.” Some scientists say the question ‘why’ is silly. “There is no answer to ‘why’,” they insist. We’ve no right to expect human-sized meaning in a giant-sized universe. The universe doesn’t *mean* anything. It just *is*,” they say.

And yet, when we contemplate the *end* of anything – a journey, an activity, or someone’s life – when any of these come to an end, that’s just what we want to know: *why*? What was its purpose? What ‘end’ did it serve? What did it *mean*? But if we can ask ‘why’ about *particular* things, can’t we ask ‘why’ about the meaning of *all* things?

Let’s come at it another way. We can ask two kinds of questions about the end of anything. One is ‘when’. The end is just the final moment of something. It’s temporal: it’s clock time. Someone dies, and a doctor records the time of death. Five o’clock comes and the work day is over. Or a referee blows the final whistle. Time’s ‘up’, and the game is finished. Everything has an *end* in this sense, even life on earth.

But the other question is not when but *why*. What *end* did it serve? What was its purpose? *Why* was it? We sometimes ask of people, especially when they do something that confuses us (as Job asked of God), what was your ‘end-game’? What were you aiming at? Why did you do that? And they might answer, as Jesus did, with the message of Advent: “Wait and see.” So often, in human affairs, it’s only when the *temporal* end arrives (and the question ‘when’ is answered), that the answer to ‘why’ at last appears. Only when we’ve taken the last step on a long journey can we begin to see what it was about all along, what purpose it served, and what it really meant.

Sometimes, though, by knowing the purpose in advance, we can make sense of the steps in the journey, even as we take them; just as, once we’ve understood what ‘checkmate’ means, we can make sense of someone’s moves – on the chessboard. (“Ah, so that’s what you’re doing. Clever!”) We can even sense the checkmate’s approach as it draws near. (“Two more moves and it’s all over!”) But no one understood Jesus’ ‘end-game’, when he said, “The Son of Man must suffer and die.” They couldn’t connect it with God’s purpose, which is to come again in great glory into our lives.

Jesus seems to say this: “If you want an answer to the first kind of question, ‘when’, I can’t tell you. I don’t know *when* the end will come. No one knows (ask an astronomer if you must). But I can say something about that other question we ask about endings, not the ‘when’ but the ‘why and wherefore’ of “life, the universe, and everything”, and the big purpose of our little lives. And if, by knowing *me*, you come to know and share something of that purpose, then through the lens of faith, if you’re alert, awake, and aware, you may see signs of God’s purpose and presence unstoppably at work around you and within you, in the same way you sense the onset of summer when the fig trees come into leaf. And you’ll begin this way of seeing and living when

you begin to see God alive in *me*," says Jesus. "For heaven and earth will pass away, they are temporal; but my words will not pass away, they are eternal," he says.

This is why faith in Jesus Christ can never be a narcotic, 'opium', as Karl Marx called it, to dull our senses and distract us from our suffering in 'real time'. The only kind of faith worth having is one that sharpens our seeing and heightens our hearing. This faith is an awakening to reality. "Keep awake," says Jesus. "You don't know *when* the master will return. In the evening, at midnight, at cockcrow, or in the morning." *In the evening?* But it was evening when he broke bread and poured wine for the last time with his friends. *At midnight?* But it was midnight when he was arrested. *At cockcrow?* That was when Peter realised he'd betrayed him. *In the morning?* That's when they found the stone rolled away.

These are signs, not of *when* God will break into our lives – no one knows when -- but *why*, and what God's 'end-game' is: it's the advent of God in our small but significant lives. Not necessarily in powerful achievements and successful moments, but in the broken, weak, and gentle things of our lives. For how does he come to us? In a baby born of an un-wed mother, in bread broken, wine outpoured, a cross on a hill, and a silent, empty tomb.

The times are not in our hands. We cannot rush salvation. Salvation is not *our* work; it's not *our* attempt to get God to notice us. Salvation is God's attempt to get us to notice the light that shines in the darkness.

### ***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 infirm, and we are not very strong. Open our eyes to your presence and renew our hope. Save your Church from worshipping itself; from failing to love each other; and from closing our heart 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 whose who feel no joy today, whose lives feel lifeless; for those who carry impossible burdens of guilt and regret; for those are dying and those who would prefer to die. Invade their despair. Lift them from feelings of futility, and 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. And to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be glory evermore.

**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, for ever. 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**