

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

*The First Sunday of Christmas
27 December 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts.

P: Let the Word of Christ dwell in you richly.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, we praise you for the glad tidings of peace and the good news of salvation. Your Word became flesh, and we have seen your glory. Make us grateful for this blessing and help us to treasure your great love for all creation. Glory be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Loving God, we open our hearts to your mercy. The year is spent. Forgive our ingratitude. Forgive the good not done, the love not given, the time torn off unused. Remind us of life's brevity, teach us to cherish each other, forgive our sin, and remake us in your love.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, your Son Jesus Christ was presented in the Temple, acclaimed as the glory of Israel and a light to the nations. Grant that in him we may be presented to you, and in the world reflect his glory; 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: "To all who receive him he gives power to become children of God." 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 God of all Creation, amid the changes and chances of this mortal life, help us to hear your unchanging Word, that we may live by trusting in your goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 148 (*Praise for God's universal glory*)

Praise the Lord!
 Praise the Lord from the heavens;
 praise him in the heights!
 Praise him, all his angels;
 praise him, all his host!
 Praise him, sun and moon;
 praise him, all you shining stars!
 Praise him, you highest heavens,
 and you waters above the heavens!
 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for he commanded and they were created.
 He established them for ever and ever;
 he fixed their bounds, which cannot be passed.
 Praise the Lord from the earth,
 you sea monsters and all deeps,
 fire and hail, snow and frost,
 stormy wind fulfilling his command!
 Mountains and all hills,
 fruit trees and all cedars!
 Wild animals and all cattle,
 creeping things and flying birds!
 Kings of the earth and all peoples,
 princes and all rulers of the earth!
 Young men and women alike,
 old and young together!
 Let them praise the name of the Lord,
 for his name alone is exalted;
 his glory is above earth and heaven.
 He has raised up a horn for his people,
 praise for all his faithful,
 for the people of Israel who are close to him.
 Praise 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

St Luke 2: 22-35 (*Simeon holds the infant Jesus, recognises him, and sings his praise.*)

When the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought Jesus up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, 'Every firstborn male shall be designated as holy to the Lord'), and they offered a sacrifice according to what is stated in the law of the Lord, 'a pair of turtle-doves or two young pigeons.'

Now there was a man in Jerusalem whose name was Simeon; this man was righteous and devout, looking forward to the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit rested on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord's Messiah.

Guided by the Spirit, Simeon came into the Temple; and when the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do for him what was customary under the law, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying,

'Master, now you are dismissing your servant in peace,
according to your word;
for my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples,
a light for revelation to the Gentiles
and for glory to your people Israel.'

And the child's father and mother were amazed at what was being said about him.

Then Simeon blessed them and said to his mother Mary, 'This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed—and a sword will pierce your own soul too.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 2: 29 "*Lord, now let your servant depart in peace.*"

Newspapers used to print a cartoon on the last day of the year. The old year was an old man, and the new year was an infant. But that's what we have here, an old man, Simeon, holding the infant Jesus.

“It had been revealed to him that he would not see death until he’d seen the Lord’s Messiah,” says St Luke. Simeon waited in the Temple the way we might wait in an airport for a friend to arrive. Whatever else he may have lived for, Simeon certainly lived for *that*, which means he lived for a purpose. Nothing makes us feel more alive than living with purpose.

The day came when he achieved it. Mary and Joseph brought their infant to the Temple. Simeon instantly saw the truth of him, held him in his arms, and sang a song of completion. “Lord, let your servant depart in peace...for my eyes have *seen* your salvation.”

Our lives resemble an arrow in flight. We’re shot from the bow at birth. Every day torn off the calendar is another mile logged. Time takes us further and further from our beginning and closer to our end, the arrow’s target, the terminus. Finally, we reach the last day and we die.

Faith teaches us to hope that by aiming *truly* at this end, and meeting it with open arms, we’ll also meet our life’s fulfilment, the way we meet our friend at the arrival gate, or the way Simeon met and held the infant Jesus. And then? Then we’ll sing our song of life’s completion. “Lord, let your servant depart in peace.”

Even so, a ticking clock can feel like an enemy. We curse ourselves for “time torn off unused”. Why didn’t we savour it more? Why didn’t we use it wisely? Why can’t we live forever? It’s not fair!

On the other hand, time can be the forgiving friend who, again and again, opens the door to second chances. “Tomorrow is another day.” That’s why some ancient cultures thought of time, not as the arc of an arrow’s flight, but as a wheel that returns us to the beginning, like the hands on a clock circling back to ‘twelve’. Each day dies at midnight, only to be re-born. And so are we, in a sense. The old year passes, too, giving way to a new one. We make resolutions ‘to do it all over again’, but with a better, wiser ‘aim’ this time.

I like to believe that Simeon, in his old age, enjoyed a ‘second childhood’. Not naïve, like the first one, always whining that ‘life’s not fair!’, but wiser and calmer and better in the face of life’s ‘slings and arrows’.

Some old people – not all, but some – discover a ‘second childhood’ in the second half of life. They’re not so anxious to clamber and claw at life anymore. They’re more forgiving of themselves and others. Their ‘second childhood’ doesn’t discount the past, but neither does it dwell there. They welcome the future with the benefit of long memory. They scan the horizon with the mature insight that only a *living* tradition can give.

Good tradition is the memory of accumulated wisdom. If we stand upon it, as on a mountain-top, we get the long view. From there, we may see (as Simeon did) God’s creative work, long-standing and on-going, in the world and in our own souls.

Simeon ages well. He departs 'in peace' because his life is wisely rounded out. Lucky him, to have played his part well and *then* 'exit, stage right' (as they say in theatre). Isn't this a better way of living – and therefore a better way of dying – than frantically 'running down the clock'?

We've all known people who leave this life disgruntled, feeling there was more to do, and they never did it. We've also known some who 'depart in peace', feeling they've achieved a purpose and finished their work. "It is finished," said Jesus as he died (and not from old age). "Let me now depart in peace," said Simeon, "my eyes have seen life's saving joy. My work is done."

Long after Simeon died, Jesus returned to the Temple (because time has way of 'circling back', returning you to your beginnings). Jesus came to accomplish *his* life's work. Simeon had predicted this. He saw how the salvation that would come in the life of this child would come with trouble and suffering too. There'd be an over-turning of the tables. "He's a sign that will be opposed. And the inner thoughts of many will be revealed in how they respond to him," he said.

What's more, because of this, *God's* saving work would spill the banks of the old covenant and flood the whole earth. His light would be "a light to lighten the Gentiles."

The Church, at its rare best, inherits the Spirit of 'second childhood'. Like Simeon watching for the infant Jesus' arrival in Temple, it scans the horizon for signs of renewal, for God's advent upon our lives, *but always through the lens of long memory*. How else will we know him when he comes?

The oldest buildings in civilised societies used to be houses of worship, places where generations of once knelt in acknowledgment of something eternal, something older and truer than our *own* little 'take' on the world. It doesn't bode well when newer generations look upon this as a stupid, archaic pursuit. But that is the view of our children and grandchildren. They may be quite clever, but they're not very wise. Theirs is a shallow and fleeting way of life.

In good worship, as in a good life, something profound and perennial gets tested again and again. And it's found to be reliable again and again. It's older and truer than our brief generational 'take' on the world.

It's the true source of the best kind of future – not a mere repetition or copy of what's gone before us, no, but the re-discovery and re-development of life's true purpose. That's the arc a good life takes on its journey through time.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, the heavens tell of your glory and the earth proclaims the wonder of your love. We offer thanks for the moon and stars, for earth and air and water, and for the gift of every living thing. In the fullness of time, you crowned creation with the birth of your Son. Visit us now with your vision of a new heaven and a new earth, that we may understand your glory.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ, giving thanks for all that has been, and seeking grace and strength for all that lies ahead in the new year. Grant, O Lord, that as the years change, we may find peace and hope in your unchanging love. For you are ever constant, guiding us by your wisdom and saving us with your love.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of all beauty, your will is that all your creatures should enjoy the world and the life you have given us. Bless those whose joy is robbed by hunger and poverty, disease and oppression. Give those in power the will to be just and caring.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who have fallen ill and fear the worst; for those isolated in hospital wards, and lonely for those they love. Be near them to comfort and save.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Almighty God, you wonderfully created, and yet more wonderfully restored, the dignity of our human nature. Grant us to share in the divine life of Jesus Christ, who came to share in our humanity.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God our Father, you cradle us at the beginning of life and take us into your arms at our journey's end. We remember and give thanks for those who died, especially those dear to us, whose lives were symbols of your wisdom. Give us eyes to see your gifts, hearts to love your creation, and hands to serve you, now and always....*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Almighty God, you have always known us, and you call us to a deeper knowing of you. As we advance in years, clothe us more and more with your love, that we may grow in wisdom and find favour in your sight.

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**