

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

*21st Sunday after Pentecost
10:30 a.m.
25 October 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: God is love, and God's love was shown to us in this:

P: that he sent his only Son into the world to bring us life.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, in whom we live and move and have our being, we give you all praise. We come with devotion to you, Christ our Redeemer. We honour you, Holy Spirit, source of hope and life of our life. Receive our praise, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, our one true and living God.

Forgiving Lord, we wish to confide in your mercy. You have searched us and known us as we are, and you do not condemn us. You are near to the broken-hearted; you save those who are crushed in spirit. You accept us, and restore us by your mercy and grace. Forgive us for doubting your love, for judging each other so harshly, for refusing to accept your acceptance of us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

O God, from whom all holy desires, all good counsels, and all just works do proceed: give to your servants that peace which the world cannot give; that our hearts may be set to obey your commandments, and that free from the fear of our enemies we may pass our time in rest and quietness; through the merits of Jesus Christ our Saviour, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "With the Lord there is mercy, and with him is plenteous redemption." 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 truth, open our minds to the movement of your Spirit, speaking through your Word, and surprise us with joy; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 90: 1-6, 13-17 (*God's eternity and human Frailty*)

Lord, you have been our dwelling-place
in all generations.
Before the mountains were brought forth,
or ever you had formed the earth and the world,
from everlasting to everlasting you are God.
You turn us back to dust,
and say, 'Turn back, you mortals.'
For a thousand years in your sight
are like yesterday when it is past,
or like a watch in the night.
You sweep them away; they are like a dream,
like grass that is renewed in the morning;
in the morning it flourishes and is renewed;
in the evening it fades and withers.

Turn, O Lord! How long?
Have compassion on your servants!
Satisfy us in the morning with your steadfast love,
so that we may rejoice and be glad all our days.
Make us glad for as many days as you have afflicted us,
and for as many years as we have seen evil.
Let your work be manifest to your servants,
and your glorious power to their children.
Let the favour of the Lord our God be upon us,
and prosper for us the work of our hands—
O prosper the work of our hands!

(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

Deuteronomy 34: 1-12 (*Moses sees the Promised Land but dies before he arrives there.*)

Moses went up from the plains of Moab to Mount Nebo, to the top of Pisgah, which is opposite Jericho, and the Lord showed him the whole land: Gilead as far as Dan, all Naphtali, the land of Ephraim and Manasseh, all the land of Judah as far as the Western Sea, the Negeb, and the Plain—that is, the valley of Jericho, the city of palm trees—as far as Zoar.

The Lord said to him, ‘This is the land of which I swore to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob, saying, “I will give it to your descendants”; I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.’

Then Moses, the servant of the Lord, died there in the land of Moab, at the Lord’s command. He was buried in a valley in the land of Moab, opposite Beth-peor, but no one knows his burial place to this day. Moses was one hundred and twenty years old when he died; his sight was unimpaired and his vigour had not abated. The Israelites wept for Moses in the plains of Moab for thirty days; then the period of mourning for Moses was ended.

Joshua son of Nun was full of the spirit of wisdom, because Moses had laid his hands on him; and the Israelites obeyed him, doing as the Lord had commanded Moses.

Never since has there arisen a prophet in Israel like Moses, whom the Lord knew face to face. He was unequalled for all the signs and wonders that the Lord sent him to perform in the land of Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his servants and his entire land, and for all the mighty deeds and all the terrifying displays of power that Moses performed in the sight of all Israel.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Deuteronomy 34:4 *“I have let you see it with your eyes, but you shall not cross over there.”*

Moses sees the Promised Land. At last. This had been his whole life’s journey – and such a long journey: his call from God at the burning bush, his quarrel with Pharaoh (“Let my people go”), the plagues and the Passover, the great exodus from Egypt, then a mountain-top meeting with God, the ten commandments, and year after year of wilderness-wandering. Had Moses foreseen moment this in his dreams? But now he sees it with his eyes. “I have let you see the Promised Land,” says God – and then this: *“But you shall not cross over there.”*

Isn't God a bit cruel? Moses had toiled and persevered. He'd interceded with God on behalf of his people and interceded with his people on behalf of God. Moses was never perfect, no, but he'd said 'yes' to the voice who'd called him. He never gave up, and he never turned back. But now, on the verge of entering the Promised Land, God denies him this "consummation devoutly to be wished." Moses gazes upon his heart's desire, like a child pressing his face against the window of a toy shop, but God locks the door against him. "You may see, but you may not enter."

It brings to my mind a famous poem by Keats, his "Ode on a Grecian Urn" (perhaps you read it in school too). He describes a scene engraved on an ancient urn: a lush garden, and two lovers figured there, frozen in time like flies stuck in amber. Keats addresses the man: "Bold lover" he says, "never, never canst thou kiss, / though winning near the goal..." So near and yet so far, in other words.

What's worse, I wonder? To try with all your might but fail, then chalk it up to experience, shrug your shoulders, and get on with something else? Or, like Moses, to come within agonising reach of your heart's desire but fail to grasp it, and then die, mesmerised by your failure like a moth forever circling the porch light. Which is the hardest heartache, I wonder? They say second place finishers in the Olympic games feel worse than those who come in third. A bronze medal winner is thrilled to make it to the podium, but silver says, "If only I'd been a split second faster, I could have been gold." "You've come all this way. You're so close. I'll let you see the Promised Land," God says to Moses. "But you will never live there." How like life, when it's cruel to us. But there's another way to look at it. Perhaps it's kindness on God's part. Like a ship's captain who launches the lifeboats but stays with the sinking ship, Moses sees the coastline but never goes ashore. But that doesn't matter to him now. His *crew* will make it home. His journey was not in vain; he did not fail. "I've let you see the Promised Land with your eyes," says God. "You will not get there, no, but your people will." Sometimes a little glimpse of the future is all it takes to vindicate the past, even as we draw our last breath. Grandparents must feel something like this, watching their grandchildren at play. They may not live to see them launch themselves into the world, or have children of their own, but they've seen the promise of that future. It's like the old man named Simeon (at the beginning of St Luke's gospel, remember?). He holds in his arms the infant Jesus – 'the hopes and fears of all the years' – and he prays, "Lord lettest now thy servant depart in peace...for mine eyes have *seen* thy salvation."

When we lose our way on life's journey – and we do – is it because we're too immersed in life's daily grind, so ensnared by the million minutiae of modern existence, its petty pre-occupations and dismal duties, that they blind us? Are we too exhausted to lift up our hearts as we stumble to the end of each day? How easy it is to lose the plot, the point, the thread of life. That's when we must ascend the mountain to see the big picture once again, to see our Promised Land and re-discover life's reason and hope.

But there's another kind of blindness. Maybe we *do* have a big picture but it's false. It misleads us. It promises a life of purpose and reward, but it's a desert mirage. It's based on a false image of ourselves, or a fake utopian dream (like the raw desire for fame or wealth or security or power). Whole societies can lose their way, not because they're bogged down in detail's drudgery, now, but because their big picture of themselves and their journey, and what it means for their nation to be 'great again', is all wrong. We saw this in Nazi Germany, and Stalin's Soviet Union, but we're slow to see it in our own time and place. Like a crook's pyramid scheme, the 'big picture' may seduce us into our own exploitation, mislead us about life's real purpose, and rob us of life's true joy. I think our secular, capitalist, consumerist world does this to us: it's a 'mountain top view' of a fake Promised Land, more 'Disney' than 'Promise'. It says life is all about earning and spending and consuming, and not much else, and then you die, and that's that.

Whether we're defeated by drudgery or misled by illusion, the cure is to regain a big picture that's *real*, a vaster view of our journey's end, one that gives point and purpose and power to our daily lives as we live them on-the-ground, here and now. For the life we live each day, step by step, is the only vehicle we have to take us to the Promised Land. So, from time to time, we need hints of God's future breaking in upon us, a glimpse from the mountain top, such as Moses had of the Promised Land.

On the night before he was murdered, Martin Luther King preached his last sermon. He was a man of big vision, wasn't he? For him, seeing was believing only because believing was already a kind of seeing. These are his last words that night: "We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't really matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over. And I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. *Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.*"

Prayers of Intercession

O God, living and true, what your prophets declared and your poets have sung of your goodness, we now see in the light of the glory shining in the face of Jesus Christ. We pray for the Church, the world, and each other.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ. Wherever your Church is tired or complacent, anxious or despairing, kindle a deeper love of worship, a stronger will to follow, and a more fervent faith to live by; and, that we may obtain what you promise, teach us to love what you command.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God, our refuge and our strength, you raise up servants to reform and renew your Church in the light of your Word. Defend your Church in our day, and keep us ever faithful to the truth that makes us free.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Because it would cheer Christ's heart, we pray for those who are outcast and despised; for those who are sick or sorrowing or suffering any kind of distress. We pray for those who are dying, that as their life draws to a close, you may draw nearer to them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Loving One, your Son Jesus Christ was made perfect by the things he suffered. Have compassion on those who travel through illness and pain. Uphold their faith, that they may trust and not be afraid; give them the comfort and strength of your presence.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We remember with thanksgiving those who have died in the faith, especially those known and dear to us. Grant that, like them, we may find our peace and rest in you, that when our days on earth are over, we may share the joys of everlasting life; through Jesus Christ our Lord,...(*keep a time of silence in God's presence*)....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, your Son has shown us how to love one another. May our love for you overflow into a joyous life, and be a light to the world.

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**