

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

*The 4th Sunday in Lent
10:30 a.m.
22 March 2020*

Opening Words

L: God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble.

P: **Therefore, we shall not fear.**

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Most holy God, you are greater than our thoughts can know, higher than our words can tell, and more merciful than our hearts can believe. Open our hearts to the glory of your presence, attune our minds to the truth of your voice, loosen our tongues in the joy of worship, and fill our lives with love and praise.

Merciful God, we confess our fears, our worries, and our anxieties. You have given us your perfect love which casts out all fear and your peace which transcends all understanding, but we feel dislodged, displaced, untethered, and uncertain during in these times. We believe, O Lord; help our unbelief.

Lord, have mercy upon us;

Christ, have mercy upon us;

Lord, have mercy upon us.

Most holy God, the source of all good desires, all right judgments, and all just works: Give to us, your servants, that peace which the world cannot give, so that our minds may be fixed on the doing of your will, and that we, being delivered from all fear, may live in peace and quietness.

O God, you will keep in perfect peace those whose minds are fixed on you; for in returning and rest we shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be our strength; through the mercies of Jesus Christ our Saviour. *Amen.*

A Prayer for Illumination

Gracious God, in order that the children of the earth might discern good from evil, you sent your Son to be the light of the world. As Christ shines upon us, may we learn what pleases you, and live in all truth and goodness; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 23

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.

He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters.

He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me.

Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over.

Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever.

**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**

The Gospel Reading for the Day

St John 9: 1-41 *(A man born blind receives his sight. This bothers people. It's a long story!)*

As Jesus walked along, he saw a man blind from birth. His disciples asked him, 'Rabbi, who sinned, this man or his parents, that he was born blind?' Jesus answered, 'Neither this man nor his parents sinned; he was born blind so that God's works might be revealed in him. We must work the works of him who sent me while it is day; night is coming when no one can work. As long as I am in the world, I am the light of the world.' When he had said this, he spat on the ground and made mud with the saliva and spread the mud on the man's eyes, saying to him, 'Go, wash in the pool of Siloam' (which means Sent). Then he went and washed and came back able to see. The neighbours and those who had seen him before as a beggar began to ask, 'Is this not the man who used to sit and beg?' Some were saying, 'It is he.' Others were saying, 'No, but it is someone like him.' He kept saying, 'I am the man.' But they kept asking him, 'Then how were your eyes opened?' He answered, 'The man called Jesus made mud, spread it on my eyes, and said to me, "Go to Siloam and wash." Then I went and washed and received my sight.' They said to him, 'Where is he?' He said, 'I do not know.'

They brought to the Pharisees the man who had formerly been blind. Now it was a Sabbath day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes. Then the Pharisees also began to ask him how he had received his sight. He said to them, 'He put mud on my eyes. Then I washed, and now I see.' Some of the Pharisees said, 'This man is not from God, for he does not observe the Sabbath.' But others said, 'How can a man who is a

sinner perform such signs?' And they were divided. So they said again to the blind man, 'What do you say about him? It was your eyes he opened.' He said, 'He is a prophet.'

The Jews did not believe that he had been blind and had received his sight until they called the parents of the man who had received his sight and asked them, 'Is this your son, who you say was born blind? How then does he now see?' His parents answered, 'We know that this is our son, and that he was born blind; but we do not know how it is that now he sees, nor do we know who opened his eyes. Ask him; he is of age. He will speak for himself.' His parents said this because they were afraid of the Jews; for the Jews had already agreed that anyone who confessed Jesus to be the Messiah would be put out of the synagogue. Therefore his parents said, 'He is of age; ask him.'

So for the second time they called the man who had been blind, and they said to him, 'Give glory to God! We know that this man is a sinner.' He answered, 'I do not know whether he is a sinner. One thing I do know, that though I was blind, now I see.' They said to him, 'What did he do to you? How did he open your eyes?' He answered them, 'I have told you already, and you would not listen. Why do you want to hear it again? Do you also want to become his disciples?' Then they reviled him, saying, 'You are his disciple, but we are disciples of Moses. We know that God has spoken to Moses, but as for this man, we do not know where he comes from.' The man answered, 'Here is an astonishing thing! You do not know where he comes from, and yet he opened my eyes. We know that God does not listen to sinners, but he does listen to one who worships him and obeys his will. Never since the world began has it been heard that anyone opened the eyes of a person born blind. If this man were not from God, he could do nothing.' They answered him, 'You were born entirely in sins, and are you trying to teach us?' And they drove him out.

Jesus heard that they had driven him out, and when he found him, he said, 'Do you believe in the Son of Man?' He answered, 'And who is he, sir? Tell me, so that I may believe in him.' Jesus said to him, 'You have seen him, and the one speaking with you is he.' He said, 'Lord, I believe.' And he worshipped him. Jesus said, 'I came into this world for judgement so that those who do not see may see, and those who do see may become blind.' Some of the Pharisees near him heard this and said to him, 'Surely we are not blind, are we?' Jesus said to them, 'If you were blind, you would not have sin. But now that you say, "We see", your sin remains.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Gospel Reading

St John 9:14 *"It was a Sabbath Day when Jesus made the mud and opened his eyes."*

St John speaks in signs and symbols. Here's what I think he's saying: God isn't finished with us. God is still preparing the world for its final finish, the way a cabinet-maker prepares the wood for its varnish, the way Christ the 'Master Carpenter' "fashions us to a truer beauty of his hand" (to quote a famous prayer of George McLeod)¹. There's a Sabbath Day still to come when we will finally, fully, see God's goodness in the world and in each one of us.

Jesus makes mud, the same stuff God used to make Adam. He daubs it on the blind man's eyes. Still blind, he stumbles to the pool of Siloam to wash. His eyes open. But in Jesus' absence, squabbling erupts about this man. Who is he? Who healed him? On the Sabbath?! They drive him from the village, his freshly-opened eyes blinking in the sunlight. That's when Jesus returns to finish his healing work. For the blind man hasn't yet seen Jesus' face. He hasn't yet come to believe in him. He hasn't arrived at a Sabbath of new understanding about himself, the world, and Jesus.

Now he does.

Faith is seeing with heart and mind, with feeling and understanding. When we're labouring over some problem, and we finally solve it, we call upon our sense of sight to describe that moment of understanding. We don't say, "Now I taste it", or "Now I smell it." We say, "Now I *see* it." And when we're filled with curiosity, we say, "Let's *see* where this leads..." This is why William Temple called Christian faith the 'experiment of life'. Every experiment begins with, "Let's *see* where this leads..." Experiments are fed by curiosity. They aim at seeing the world with clarity .

Like the blind man Jesus healed, we've all had 'Sabbath moments' of seeing. They're like a car windshield covered with winter grime but suddenly scrubbed clean. They're like coming upon a scene of great beauty and we're moved to the point of tears. They're moments, as the philosopher Joseph Pieper said, "when we look on a child's face in the midst of the toils and troubles of everyday life, and at that moment see that everything which is good, loved and lovable, is loved by God...[we see] that everything comes to its appointed goal; that in spite of all appearances, underlying all things is peace, salvation, glory; that nothing and no one is lost; that God holds in his hand the beginning, middle, and end of all that is."²

¹ "O Christ, the Master Carpenter, who at the last, through wood and nails, purchased our whole salvation; wield well your tools in the workshop of your world, that we, who come rough-hewn to your bench, may be fashioned to a truer beauty of your hand. *Amen*"

² Joseph Pieper, *Happiness and Contemplation*, (South Bend, Indiana: St Augustine's Press, 1998), p.84

The experiment of life is the life of faith. It's made from moments of discovery and seeing; moments when our deeper knowing of God entails a deeper seeing of God's goodness and love for us. Each one is a 'little Sabbath'.

Why must we fall ill and suffer? Why was this man born blind? "This man was born blind so that God's *works* might be *seen* in him," said Jesus. But he means us too. Broken and blind, sick and sorrowful, no one should be expelled from the village. We all want finishing in God's new Sabbath creation, "fashioned to a truer beauty of his hand."

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, we lift up our hearts to offer the Church's praise and thanksgiving. Hear us now, as we pray for the world, through Christ our Lord, in the power of the Holy Spirit. We pray for the whole Church of Christ in every corner of the world, and especially today for Elmwood Avenue Church; for all who see it as their spiritual home; for who long to worship you again in its beautiful sanctuary, to lift up their voices there in song and prayer.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray a swift end to COVID-19. We pray those infected and those who have been exposed; grant them strength, healing, and protection. We pray for their loved ones and caretakers; grant them peace, comfort, and endurance. We pray for physicians, nurses, lab technicians, medical researchers, administrators, and all healthcare workers around the world; grant them strength by your life-giving Spirit. Fill them with hope and give them perseverance for the work they must do.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for our neighbourhoods, for this city of London, for our nation and its leaders. We pray for those who govern the nations of the world; grant them wisdom, courage, and humility.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for those who must work despite the threat of illness; grant them good health, protection, and continued provision. We pray for those who have become unemployed during this pandemic; grant them comfort, wisdom, and financial provision.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for parents and families, grant them wisdom, patience and joy; for children, grant them protection from fear; for those for whom home is not a safe haven,

grant them refuge; for those who are alone and lonely, grant them a sense of your presence and love; and for those who have no home at all, protect, shelter, and help them.

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

We pray for ourselves, living in this time of uncertainty and fear; grant us your peace. Hear the prayers we cannot voice because our words are insufficient and our knowledge is weak...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy,

P: Hear our prayer.

Gracious God, you have promised through your well-beloved Son Jesus Christ that when we meet in his name, and pray according to his mind, he will be among us and will hear our prayer. Fulfil our desires, and give us your greatest gift, which is to know you, the only true God, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

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**