

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

*The 2nd Sunday of Advent
6 December 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: Prepare the way of the Lord.

P: Make straight in the desert a highway for our God.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Eternal Love, who show your splendour in the humble birth of your only begotten Son, we praise you for the joy of this season, for the light of your love shining brightly at the darkest time of the year. Help us to rejoice in the coming of our Lord, to see his glory with eyes undimmed, and then receive his blessing. Glory be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Holy God, and merciful, we confess our sins. You know the secrets of our hearts: how blind we are to our own faults, yet harsh in judging others; how swift we are to take for gain, yet slow to give for others. Help us to know that no wrong we have done, no good we have failed to do, could be too great for you to forgive. As we receive your mercy, restore your image in us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

God of timeless grace, you fill us with joyful expectation. Make us ready for the message that prepares the way, that with strong hearts and holy joy, we may eagerly await the coming of your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God 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 Holy Lord, prepare our hearts to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, by hearing, we may know your will and trust in your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 85: 1-2, 8-13 (*A prayer for the restoration of God's favour*)

Lord, you were favourable to your land;
 you restored the fortunes of Jacob.
 You forgave the iniquity of your people;
 you pardoned all their sin.
 Let me hear what God the Lord will speak,
 for he will speak peace to his people,
 to his faithful, to those who turn to him in their hearts.
 Surely his salvation is at hand for those who fear him,
 that his glory may dwell in our land.

Steadfast love and faithfulness will meet;
 righteousness and peace will kiss each other.
 Faithfulness will spring up from the ground,
 and righteousness will look down from the sky.
 The Lord will give what is good,
 and our land will yield its increase.
 Righteousness will go before him,
 and will make a path for his steps.

(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 1: 1-8 (*John the Baptist foretells the coming of Jesus*)

The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God.
 As it is written in the prophet Isaiah –
 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you,
 who will prepare your way;
 the voice of one crying out in the wilderness:

“Prepare the way of the Lord,
make his paths straight” ‘ –

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel’s hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, ‘The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.’

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

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 1:3 *“The voice of one crying in the wilderness, ‘Prepare the way of the Lord’.”*

For a long time, one day a week, I’d board a train in the morning bound for Toronto and return the same night. Not once was the train on time. Often, on the way home, already forty minutes late, the train would stop and sit in the middle of nowhere – which, it turns out, is somewhere between Guelph and Kitchener. Imprisoned in a railway carriage, we passengers could only sit still and wait in the quiet and dark. Sometimes the train would crawl backwards, and everyone groaned. That’s when some of us would order a beer.

“I have one kind of beer left,” the porter would say. “But the fridge is broken, and it’s warm.”

“I’ll take it,” I’d say. For I was seeking solace in the middle of this journey, now turned into a prison sentence, stuck in the middle of nowhere.

Fuelled by warm beer, the silence of ‘strangers on a train’ would give way to a crescendo of chatter, until a disembodied voice broke in from nowhere and we’d ‘shush’ each other. “May we have your attention please...,” it said. We were hungry to hear this disembodied word from on high. Surely it would address our stuck condition, promise a remedy, and give us reason to hope again. I came to see these train journeys as little parables of the human condition.

Advent, too, brings us a voice from nowhere. It says, “May I have your attention please?” The voice belongs to John the Baptist. In a world waiting in the dark, *he* sensed the Messiah’s arrival. “Someone is coming who’s more powerful than I am,” he said. “Prepare the way of the Lord.” But in order to hear this ‘word from nowhere’ the

people had to go into the wilderness, the middle of nowhere – not a railway siding between Guelph and Kitchener, but the wilderness of Judea, far from the ‘madding crowd’ and the deafening noise of commerce and politics, entertainment and work. How else would they hear the prophet’s voice announcing salvation’s arrival?

What does the voice of John the Baptist say that we must hear? “Prepare yourselves. Repent,” he says. Why? Because we’re facing the wrong direction, that’s why. ‘To repent’ is simply to turn and face a *new* direction, to change our mind about something, to take a new and better stance in the world. ‘Repent’ means all of that.

Even so, it sounds like an angry fundamentalist word, doesn’t it? To say, “You must repent; prepare the way of the Lord!” has come to mean, “Feel bad, for the kingdom of God is at hand!” The logic seems to be this: *you are bad*, God wants you to feel sorry for being bad (so God can finally forgive you), and feeling bad is the best way to show how sorry you are about how bad you are. So, paradoxically, the way to feel good about yourself is to feel bad about yourself. In other words, *repent*.

There’s something to this, of course. If we dare to look closely at who we are, and what we’ve done and left undone, there’s enough to make us wince and blush – ‘to feel bad’ in other words. It would be wrong to deny this. And some of us, strangely, *do* feel rather good about feeling bad, don’t we? – as if it’s a sign of saintliness. There’s a bit of Eeyore in the corner of everyone’s soul. There was never anything so pleasant in ‘the hundred-acre wood’ but Eeyore couldn’t find its miserable side and wallow in it. (I sounded a lot like Eeyore on the train: “*Stuck again. Probably never get home now...*”)

But isn’t *this*, maybe, what needs repentance, change, and new direction – our ‘inner Eeyore’? Remorse may move us in a good direction, yes. So can sorrow. But so can joy and beauty and curiosity and wonder. We say something is ‘very moving’ when we feel its movement within us. Joy and beauty – *these* can change us too. If God can move us with sorrow and guilt, why not with wonder and gratitude too?

The ‘wilderness’ of the gospel story is not just a place on a map. It’s a spiritual condition we need to visit from time to time. We go to the wilderness to be moved, to repent. I’ve walked our noisy streets and not been able to converse with the person walking beside me, so loud is the traffic’s roar, the whine of sirens, the jackhammers of construction, and thumping music blaring from outdoor speakers. Under those conditions, really to hear the person who’s walking beside us, or the whisper of God within us, we must turn away from this noisy world of getting and spending and *face a new direction*. If we’re ever to connect, we must find an oasis of quiet, a patch of wilderness in the cacophonous concrete life we live. It could even be a railway carriage, stopped in its tracks, long behind schedule, and many miles from home. It could be any place that causes us to be quiet and still enough to hear the wondrous, saving Word when it finally breaks into our lives.

Christmas commemorates God’s new beginning, with us and for us, in the birth of the Christ child. But doesn’t every new beginning begin with a pause? Picture the

stillness of high divers in the moment before they leap off the board; or a sprinter, motionless at the starting line, waiting for the crack of the starter's gun. Every good beginning begins in stillness and emptiness; the emptiness of Mary's womb, the void of Easter's empty tomb; just as, before the Creation of the World, there was nothing to see, nothing to hear...nothing at all. And then God spoke, and there was beautiful sound, like music, breaking the silence. And God said, "Let there be light," and there was beautiful brightness, which was also a love powerful enough to see and be seen by.

Isn't a new beginning waiting and wanting to happen in us, too? What if, in the midst of this pandemic's pandemonium, we stopped in our tracks and visited the wilderness that lives within each of us for a few minutes, every day, to be still and quiet, to release ourselves from life's frenzy, to hush our anxious souls and still our restless minds, and then to *repent*, by turning our gaze in a Godward direction, to listen for God's still, small voice telling us we're loved, we're forgiven, and we *matter*, even before we've done a single thing. What would happen then?

We'd feel the joy of new life being born within us, wouldn't we?

Prayers of Intercession

God of mercy and might, prepare a way in the wilderness, clear a straight path in our hearts, that the advent of your Son may find us watchful and eager for the glory he reveals.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Christ. O God, you call your people to shine as lights in the world. We pray for those who bear witness to you in difficult places, and for those who suffer for what they believe to be true. Uphold their faith, give them freedom to think and act, and cause your word to be heard and heeded.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace, wherever there is hostility and warfare, for those in need, for the poor who need food and shelter, for the rich who need to share their affluence, for the sick, who need healing, for the oppressed, who need justice; and for all of us, who need your forgiveness.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Merciful God, by your Son's incarnation, you have united things earthly and heavenly. Look with mercy on the sorrows of our city, our nation, our world; where there is conflict, help us to bring peace; where there is pain, comfort; where there is inequity, justice; where there is hatred, love.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for crowded hospitals and care homes, for those who work within them, and for those who watch over the public health of all society. Help all of us to care for the sick, to heal the wounds of life, and to comfort those who are dying. When we grow weary, renew our strength.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O God of all times and places, we give thanks for those who have died in the faith, especially those known to us, who have entered into the joy and peace of your presence. Grant that we may come to share with them the glory of everlasting life.

...(keep a time of silence in God's presence)....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Eternal God, as you led your people in ages past, direct our journey in years to come, until that day when you gather up all things in Christ, your peace indwells all Creation, and we shall feast forever at your Table; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever.

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**