

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

*The 3rd Sunday of Advent
13 December 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light;

P: those who live in a land of deep darkness – on them light has shined.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy Lord, you spoke to your chosen people by the prophets, and in our Saviour Jesus Christ you fulfil the hope of Israel and the desire of all nations. By your Word and Holy Spirit make us ready to receive Christ truly as our Lord and Saviour, and with grateful hearts to praise him, now and always.

God most high and most near, you send glad tidings to the lowly, you hide not your face from the poor; those who dwell in darkness you call into the light. Take away our blindness, remove the hardness of our hearts, and form us into a humble people, that, at the advent of your Son, we may recognise him in our midst, and find joy in his saving presence.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious God, you sent John the Baptist to prepare the way for the coming of your Son. Grant us wisdom to understand your purpose. Open our hearts to know your will, that we, too, may prepare the way for Christ, who comes to dwell in our hearts, and to establish his kingdom of justice and peace, 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 Guide us, O Lord, by your Word and Holy Spirit, that in your light we may see your truth, and in your truth find our freedom, and in our freedom discover our peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 126 (*A Song of Joy*)

When the Lord restored the fortunes of Zion,
 we were like those who dream.
 Then our mouth was filled with laughter,
 and our tongue with shouts of joy;
 then it was said among the nations,
 'The Lord has done great things for them.'
 The Lord done great things for us,
 and we rejoiced.
 Restore our fortunes, O Lord,
 like the watercourses in the Negeb.
 May those who sow in tears
 reap with shouts of joy.
 Those who go out weeping,
 bearing the seed for sowing,
 shall come home with shouts of joy,
 carrying their sheaves.

(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 John 1: 6-9, 19-28 (*The testimony of John the Baptist*)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, 'Who are you?'

He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, 'I am not the Messiah.'

And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

Then they said to him, 'Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

He said, 'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, "Make straight the way of the Lord"', as the prophet Isaiah said.

Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. They asked him, 'Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?'

John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.'

This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

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

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 1:26 "*Among you stands one whom you do not know.*"

Rabbis used to discuss a bit of folklore, the belief that when the Messiah came, he'd come into our midst 'incognito'. He could be standing right beside us, but we wouldn't know it. This may be why the powers-that-be paid a visit to John the Baptist.

"Who *are* you?" they wanted to know.

"I'll tell you right now, I'm *not the Messiah*," said John.

Relieved, they asked him, "Are you Elijah, then, are you the prophet?"

"No and no," he says.

Notice that he doesn't reply by saying who he *is*. He only tells them who he's *not*. It reminds me of the work of a sculptor. Michelangelo said, "The finished figure is already *there*, but it's hidden in the block of marble. All I do is chip away the extraneous bits to reveal it." In the same way, the questions asked by those clergy sent from the Temple chip away at John the Baptist. "Are you the Messiah?" (No), Elijah? (No), a prophet? ("You're getting warmer," John could have said).

It's one of those 'mid-life crisis' questions, isn't it? "*Who are you? Have you become a stranger to your own self?*" The question may return at the end of life. Not "Who are you?" but "Who have you been? What identity did you sculpt from the raw material of your life? What was your life *about*?"

So, who is John the Baptist? "I'm a voice crying in the wilderness," he says. "There's a light coming into the world. It's the light that enlightens everyone. I'm not that light. Neither are you," he says, "I'm here to testify to that light. I'm a *witness* to that light. That's who I am – a witness."

But what's a witness? A witness testifies, not to themselves, but to someone or something else *as it touches upon them*. Think of witnesses in a court room. They must faithfully report what they've seen and heard and felt. But by being true to their experience, *they're also being true to themselves*, aren't they? "This is what I've seen and heard. This is how it affected me, truly." John the Baptist is a witness. To understand 'who he is' we must understand what his life is about, what it's a witness *to*. His life – his 'voice' – speaks of the light and love of God coming into the world in Jesus, the light that's hidden from our view.

Or perhaps it's *we* who hide from the light?

When our lives witness to something larger than ourselves, we thrive. It's a sad and selfish life that's only ever about *itself*. An old definition of sin is this: "a self that's curled in upon itself". Think of fingers curled into a fist for fighting. Only an open hand can give and receive. A life that never gives, never receives, can never witness to anything but itself, never take part in anything larger than its own little self. *That is a life curled in upon itself*. No matter how wealthy or powerful or famous we are, we're not 'great' (in the sense the disciples meant when they asked each other, 'Which of us is greatest?'). We're *small souls* until we open our closed fists to partake of God's love, and our lives become its witness. And when we do, we discover and reveal who we're meant to be. That's the 'wonder' of it.

So, here's a story I read long ago. I think it's about how we could be better witnesses to the incarnate love of God, who is already present in the world, and already hidden in our own little lives.

Once there was a monastery. It fell on hard times. In its heyday it was filled with energetic people. The sanctuary rang with prayers and songs. But now, hardly anyone came to pray or sing anymore. A handful of monks shuffled around on tired legs. They were irritable and mean to each other. When the door came off its hinges, and the roof began to leak, they argued about who should fix them. But no one did. They still said prayers every morning and evening, but they said them with heavy hearts. They were just going through the motions. They were burnt out.

One day, a vagabond knocked on the door. He asked for a meal and a bed for the night. They took him in. He stayed for a few days, making himself useful. There was something special about him. The monks weren't so quarrelsome when he was around. He said, "Let's repair the door and the roof," and they did.

But still, the abbot of the monastery was sad. He needed someone to open his heart to. He invited this strange visitor to eat and pray with him. The stranger stared at the abbot, and said: "You and your brothers serve God with heavy hearts, don't you? Let me give you a word of wisdom. But you can only repeat it once. After you've said it, it must never be said out loud again."

"Tell me," said the abbot.

The vagabond leaned forward, whispered something in his ear, and then sat back again. His words startled the abbot. His eyes were as wide as saucers. Then the vagabond said, "I must go now. Remember, you may only use those words once."

"I promise," said the abbot. And the vagabond left, never to be seen again.

The next morning the abbot gathered the monks in the chapter house. He said, "Before our holy guest left us, he gave me a word of wisdom to tell you. I tell it to you now, but these words must never be spoken again." The abbot looked at each of his brothers. "He told me that one of us is the Messiah."

Now it was the monks' turn to be startled. "What does this mean?" they asked each other. "Am I the Messiah, are *you* the Messiah?"

As time went by, they began to treat each other with new reverence and care. There was something whole-hearted about them now. For the first time in a long time they lived as people at ease with themselves and accepting of each other. A new spring entered their step; a new courtesy filled the community. They felt grateful and content, as only people who are blessed, and who *know* they are blessed, can feel.

When they entered the sanctuary to pray, they prayed and sang with happy hearts. Visitors were moved by these old monks. And before long, people from surrounding villages came to learn from them, to be nourished by their prayers and songs. Young people asked to make their vows and live with them. For they remembered the holy man's words, and kept them in their hearts, and lived by them. They treated each other as 'little Christs'.

The *Messiah* does live among us now – in you, in me, in others. He stands right beside us, commanding our love and respect. For Christ was born as *one* of us to restore his image in *all* of us; to open our closed and angry fists with his open, generous hand; to chip away the parts that obscure his image in us, and so reveal his hidden love – in you, in me, in them.

That is what the Church is for. That is who we are.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, we praise you for the good news you give your Church to proclaim at Advent and Christmas. We praise you for the joy of this season, and for the light of your love that enters our home at the darkest time of the year. Keep our hope alive for the Saviour's coming.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ. Eternal God, give your people grace and courage to proclaim your mighty work in Christ, in the crib and on the cross. Help us to be faithful witnesses to him, by welcoming the stranger, by speaking the truth in love, and by watching for your coming in the world all around us. Help us to face our fears, in these frightening times, but not to give into them.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of the Church, strengthen us where we are weak, and support our efforts to do your will. Though we cannot sing aloud with tongues and voices, free our hearts to offer silent hymns of praise, and carols of adoration.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for young people, both those known to us, and young people everywhere. Be near them as they face the trials and troubles of these days.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who take risks for the welfare of others in these risky times; for physicians who stretch out their hands to heal; for nurses and caregivers who use their skill for the comfort of others; for therapists and counsellors who open their hearts to the sorrows of others. Bring your healing, O Lord, to those who heal.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Hear our prayers for those who suffer, for victims of cruelty and accident, for those whose faith is shaken by what they have seen and endured and lost. Invade them with your grace, console them with your comfort, and give them that hope and courage whose source is your own love.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Eternal God, we remember with thanksgiving those who have died, who have gone before us in the way of Jesus Christ. Keep us, like them, walking in his way, faithful to his truth and eager for the life that lives in him; until, under the sway of his grace, our lives become a perfect image of his eternal love...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord our God, let your glory dawn to take away our darkness, that at the coming of your Son, we may be revealed as children of light.

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**