

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

*The 3rd Sunday after Epiphany
24 January 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: O Lord, open thou our lips,

P: And our mouth shall show forth thy praise.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Loving Creator, your faithfulness is firm; righteousness and justice are the foundations of your throne. Your love goes before you as you speak a world into being and make a strong covenant with your people. You alone are God, above, beyond, and within all creation. Refresh our faith now and place your guiding hand upon us. Glory be to you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Into the peace of your presence, and with trust in your mercy, we bring our restless lives. Forgive the harm we have done to your image in us and in others. Forgive us for setting our hope on things that perish in the grasping; for trusting, not in you, but in our own power and pride. Help us to repent. We seek your forgiveness and long for amendment of life.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, your kingdom is near in Jesus your Son. Your word calls us to faith, your love fulfils our lives. Open our ears to the voice of Christ, and open our hearts to answer his call; to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be glory and praise. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." 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, surprise us with joy and open our minds to the movement of your Spirit, speaking through your Word; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 62: 5-12 (*A Song of Trust in God Alone*)

For God alone my soul waits in silence,
 for my hope is from him.
 He alone is my rock and my salvation,
 my fortress; I shall not be shaken.
 On God rests my deliverance and my honour;
 my mighty rock, my refuge is in God.
 Trust in him at all times, O people;
 pour out your heart before him;
 God is a refuge for us.
 Those of low estate are but a breath,
 those of high estate are a delusion;
 in the balances they go up;
 they are together lighter than a breath.
 Put no confidence in extortion,
 and set no vain hopes on robbery;
 if riches increase, do not set your heart on them.

(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

Jonah 3: 1-10 (*Jonah, the reluctant prophet, calls Nineveh to repent. They do.*)

The word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time, saying, 'Get up, go to Nineveh, that great city, and proclaim to it the message that I tell you.' So Jonah set out and went to Nineveh, according to the word of the Lord.

Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days' walk across. Jonah began to go into the city, going a day's walk. And he cried out, 'Forty days more, and Nineveh shall be overthrown!' And the people of Nineveh believed God; they proclaimed a fast, and everyone, great and small, put on sackcloth.

When the news reached the king of Nineveh, he rose from his throne, removed his robe, covered himself with sackcloth, and sat in ashes.

Then he had a proclamation made in Nineveh: 'By the decree of the king and his nobles: No human being or animal, no herd or flock, shall taste anything. They shall not feed, nor shall they drink water. Human beings and animals shall be covered with sackcloth, and they shall cry mightily to God. All shall turn from their evil ways and from the violence that is in their hands. Who knows? God may relent and change his mind; he may turn from his fierce anger, so that we do not perish.'

When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them; and he did not do it.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Jonah 3:1 *The Word of the Lord came to Jonah a second time...*

We have to remember all four chapters of this folktale to make sense of any one of them. The 'Word of the Lord' came to Jonah a *second* time (in chapter three), because when it came to him the *first* time (in chapter one), Jonah ran as fast as he could in the opposite direction.

"Go to Nineveh," God had said. "Go to the mightiest city of the mighty Assyrians. Jump up and down, make a big scene, and tell them to repent of their evil ways, won't you?"

But whenever God asks, "Won't you?", he really means, "You *will*!" For God's grace is just as irresistible as his calling is effectual. Grace defeats us and our calling captures us, eventually, by winning us over completely. So said John Calvin.

And yet, though resistance is futile, still we resist.

The Assyrians had a massive army. And the Assyrians were Israel's massive enemy. For Jonah to go Nineveh and tell them to repent would be like a lone American landing in Moscow at the height of the Cold War, marching up to the Kremlin Wall, and shouting through a bullhorn, "Stop it with all this Communist Nonsense!"

Three thoughts must have flitted through Jonah's mind. First, "God's plan for me will fail." Second, "I'll get badly hurt in the bargain." His third thought follows from the first two: "*Run away!*"

God had said, "Go East, young man." Instead, Jonah boarded a ship heading West, "to get away from the presence of the Lord."

But he couldn't get away. Like the fretful English poet, Francis Thompson, anxious Jonah experienced God as 'The Hound of Heaven' who chases his prey relentlessly.

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days;
I fled Him, down the arches of the years;
I fled Him, down the labyrinthine ways
Of my own mind; and in the mist of tears
I hid from Him...*

Jonah flees for Tarshish not because he wants to go to Tarshish but because he *doesn't* want to go to Nineveh. Which is what God wants him to do. Which is his destiny, his calling, his *raison d'être*.

You remember what happens next. The weather started getting rough, the tiny ship was tossed. If not for the courage of the fearless crew, the schooner would be lost.

They turn on Jonah. "If you're not going to help us bail out the lifeboats, at least cry to your God for help, would you? Who the heck *is* your God, anyway?" They need to know. There are as few atheists on sinking ships as there are in embattled foxholes.

Jonah says, "Ah yes, that may be the problem. You see, I'm a Hebrew. The Hebrew God is not one of your tinpot household gods. My God made everything that is, the sea, the dry land, the lot. And I'm running away from him."

The sailors put 'two and two' together. *Jonah's* presence is causing this storm. "Throw me into the sea," he says. "So, they picked Jonah up and threw him into the sea. And the sea ceased from its raging." For Jonah would rather have death-by-drowning than life in the grip of God's call and claim. Perhaps in *Sheol*, the underworld of the dead, he'll finally be left alone.

But no. You remember what happens next in this frequently funny fable. God sends a fantastic fish to swallow Jonah. This saves him from drowning, yes, but it's also prison transport. Jonah can't run anymore.

For God always has a way of getting to us, saving us in a way that undoes our made-up means of self-improvement, dragging us home, ignominiously, to face our real selves and finally fulfil our *raison d'être*.

What's 'bred in the bone will out in the flesh'. Our destiny – nay, our 'pre-destined destiny' (Calvin again) – is built into the bones of God's providence. God won't be outrun forever.

*I fled Him, down the nights and down the days...
...But with unhurrying chase,
And unperturbèd pace,
Deliberate speed, majestic instancy,*

the 'Hound of Heaven' pursues us.

Like Jonah, ancient mariners sailed West too, only to discover the 'far East' was the long way home again. Oedipus tried to flee his fate only to run right into it on the

road out of town. Many of us run from our callings, our built-in reason-for-being, only to discover that our so-called 'running away' was never a 'running away' at all. It was the longer, harder road home.

After three days and nights, God commands the fish to vomit up Jonah on dry land. What an ignoble homecoming! Now he *does* go to Nineveh. But like a child doing chores, he drags his heels. His heart is not in it.

He tells the Ninevites just once, briefly, that doom is coming upon them. And, just like that, in a flash, the whole city repents, even the king, who decrees that even the animals shall fast and wear sackcloth.

Jonah's excuse that 'this would never work' was spectacularly wrong. Neither did these 'Assyrian enemies' beat him up, as he'd feared they would. But he's hurting, nonetheless. He resents it that God wants Ninevites, too, to live within the orbit of his mercy. So, Jonah sits and sulks and whines to God: "See? *That's* why I fled to Tarshish. I just *knew* you'd be merciful to Nineveh."

God has 'words' with this pouting prophet. But that's another story (chapter 4), with other lessons, for another day. (Isn't the Old Testament wonderful?)

For now, in the light of Jonah's adventure, we could do worse than ponder T.S. Eliot's thoughts on life and providence. They come towards the end of his poem "Little Gidding":

*With the drawing of this Love and the voice of this Calling
We shall not cease from exploration
And the end of all our exploring
Will be to arrive where we started
And know the place for the first time.*

If there were ever a reason to run away from God, let it be because, upon our ineluctable return to where we began, we'll truly "know the place for the first time" – bruised and chastened, yes, but fully ourselves now, because we're completely home. But what an adventure!

This must be what that other fictional fellow, the Prodigal Son, felt when he 'came to himself', defeated and captured by the irresistible grace that would finally win him over. He stared up the road he'd fled down, turned, and headed for home.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy One, we pray for the Church and the world, ourselves and each other. Give us courage and conviction to answer your call to service and discovery, and then bring us home.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Christ. Your kingdom is among us as scattered seeds waiting to burst into flower. Make your Church a commonwealth of justice and joy, that the light of your presence may be revealed to all nations.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are persecuted. We pray for an end to religious hatreds and all terrorism, for restoration of good government everywhere, and lasting peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for young people everywhere, and for those trying to find the right path in a confusing world. Call them into a deeper faith. Let them to know the joy you have in them. Stir up in within the body of your Church a lively respect for their ideals and sympathy for their frustrations.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who need to feel close to God, who need the assurance of God's love, and the encouragement of God's Spirit. We pray for those afflicted by sadness that will not away, by illness that will not heal, and by worries that will not leave.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering the communion of saints, and with gratitude for those whom we have loved, who have died, we keep a time of silence in your presence ...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, your compassion embraces all people, your law is our wisdom, your truth is our freedom, and your providence is joy for the poor. Pour out your Spirit upon us now, that we who are Christ's body may bear the good news of his promises to all who seek you and long for salvation; 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**