

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

*The 4th Sunday of Advent
20 December 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: The true light, which enlightens everyone, is coming into the world.

P: The glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy Son of God, infinity cloistered in Mary's womb and perfect image of the Father who begot you, we praise you for the holy love and eternal light you bring into our world. Warm our hearts with the joy of his birth, that we may join the angels' song of glory to God in the highest.

Merciful One, we kneel before the Child of the manger, whose human nature reveals your divine life, and what ours might yet become. Forgive our hardness of heart. Have we confused faith in you with good feeling in ourselves? Have we mistaken true love with our wanting to be loved? Forgive us. Let all that is hostile to his love wither and die within us; and let all that is true in his humanity be born in us today.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

O God of grace, your eternal Word united forever with our human nature when Mary placed her life at the service of your will. Fill us with your Spirit, that, with her, we may rejoice in our salvation and magnify your holy name; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who with you and the Holy Spirit, lives and reigns 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 One, give us the wisdom that is born in humility, that, being taught by you in Holy Scripture, we may receive your truth and choose your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

A Cantic for the Day

St Luke 1: 46-55 (*Mary's 'Magnificat'*)

My soul doth magnify the Lord,
 and my spirit hath rejoiced in God my Saviour.
 For he hath regarded
 the lowliness of his handmaiden.
 For behold, from henceforth
 all generations shall call me blessed.
 For he that is mighty hath magnified me,
 and holy is his Name.
 And his mercy is on them that fear him
 throughout all generations.
 He hath shewed strength with his arm;
 he hath scattered the proud in the imagination of their hearts.
 He hath put down the mighty from their seat,
 and hath exalted the humble and meek.
 He hath filled the hungry with good things,
 and the rich he hath sent empty away.
 He remembering his mercy hath holpen his servant Israel,
 As he promised to our forefathers,
 Abraham and his seed for ever.

(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 Luke 1: 26-38 (*The angel Gabriel visits Mary*)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.'

But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?'

'The angel said to her, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.'

Then Mary said, 'Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.'

Then the angel departed from her.

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

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 1:38 *"Let it be with me according to your word."*

Mary's first feeling was fear. So, the angel Gabriel said: "Do not be afraid." Then the look on her face asked 'why', as in "Why me?"

"Because God favours you," said the angel.

"Now I'm confused" she answered. "*How* can this be? I am a virgin after all."

"The Holy Spirit will come upon you," said the angel, as though this clears it up. ("How am I supposed to explain *that*?" she must have thought.)

Mary lived in a time and place when women had little say over their lives. Decisions were made *for* them, by fathers, husbands, brothers, and sons – by the masculine powers-that-be.

But this message reaches her from the power that reigns *above* all 'powers-that-be'. It comes from the love who moves the sun and stars. And love doesn't make imperial decrees. Love never 'demands to be obeyed – *or else*.' Love won't force its will on the beloved one. Love invites, requests, entices, pleads – and then waits.

Perhaps Gabriel's divine proposition to Mary – "You will conceive in your womb and bear a Son, and you will name him Jesus" – is meant to counteract the Serpent's proposition to Eve in the Garden of Eden. "Come on. It won't kill you to try this apple."

That enticing proposition led to our expulsion from Paradise. How fitting, then, that the undoing of our 'original' sin should begin with a holy counter-proposition. Gabriel must have held his breath, and the high court of heaven, leaning forward and peering down, must have held their breath with him.

Even when we *know* we must and shall say 'yes' to someone, we often say, "Let me think about it first."

*Two roads diverged in a yellow wood,
And sorry I could not travel both
And be one traveler, long I stood
And looked...*

*...and I –
I took the one less travelled by,
And that has made all the difference.*

Every life has moments when we must choose between a well-beaten path or the road less-travelled. Some choices make all the difference. Their consequences are eternal.

The trick is to keep our eyes peeled for those moments and not let them whiz by us without thought or notice. To miss our destiny isn't like missing an exit on the freeway. We may not be able to turn around and try again. Sometimes, the angel's message arrives, tarries briefly, and then it's gone forever.

Remember Jesus weeping over Jerusalem? "*You did not recognise the time of your visitation from God.*" It came, it went, and they did not see it.

God will not force us to love him in return. For God didn't make us to be slaves, or robots to be programmed into obedience. God has patience and respect for our freedom to decide, however foolish our decisions. That makes sense. Patience and respect are signs of love.

As God waited for Mary, so God waits for us – waits for our wills to conform to his will, waits for our love to answer his love, and waits for our hearts to discover *his* heart in the birth of his Son Jesus Christ.

St Luke wants us to know that Mary has a rich inner life too. There's a universe inside her, as there is in each of us too. When the angel Gabriel visits her, does she blab and shout his message to everyone, like a tasteless TV evangelist? She does not. She 'takes it in', like a gift left on the doorstep, and ponders it quietly.

It's as though *two* kinds of conceiving happen within Mary. One is the conception of our Lord in her womb. The other is the conceiving that goes on in her mind and heart. She 'ponders'. To ponder isn't to dissect and fully understand. It's simply to digest the message, to pore over it in our minds, and to feel its weight and significance.

Every Christmas Eve, St Luke reminds us that even after Jesus is born, and the shepherds leave the stable, Mary is *still* pondering the wonder and mystery of it all.

For faith deals with mystery. "I do not understand in order to believe," said St Anselm, a great mediaeval philosopher. "I believe in order to understand." Or think of it this way. Usually we say, "If I can't know, then I won't trust." But faith says: "If you don't first trust, then you can never know." A lot of life is like that. It calls for a trusting 'yes', even when we can't yet know.

"How can this be?" says Mary. She doesn't know. Yet she speaks a trusting yes – "Let it be" – and thereby conceives. She conceives in her heart-and-mind as much as in her womb; in spirit and matter, both.

I think this is why Mary – an unwed, teenaged mother – is a model of faith as it's meant to be lived. Not just because she answers God's request by saying 'yes', but because, much later, long after the 'powerful' men have abandoned Jesus and fled into the night, Mary will still be there at the foot of the cross. This is love.

Martin Luther said three great miracles happened at Christmas: God became a human being, a virgin conceived, and Mary believed. "And the greatest miracle was this," he said. "Mary believed."

Prayers of Intercession

God of mystery, here in our midst you reveal the light that lightens us all. For you we wait; for you we listen. May we, like Mary, hear your voice, experience your love, and accept your will for us, that your life may be born in us today.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ, scattered but not defeated. Teach your Church the greatness that lies in humility. Bestow upon us the mind and spirit of the child of Bethlehem, that sharing in his love, and serving him all our days, we may also share in his joy.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace and goodwill in the whole human family. Pour into the hearts of all people the peace we so desperately seek and which you alone can give. Give peace among the nations, peace in our land, peace in our homes, and in our hearts.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for families and friends in whose presence we would celebrate this happy festival, but cannot. Give us true love for them, and unselfish desire for their health and joy. We pray for children, for their unclouded joy at this time of year. Create in us a pattern of human love that will show your divine love to each other.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those whose cheerfulness in this merry season has been stolen by illness or bereavement, by fear and isolation caused by the pandemic, and for those whose joy is broken by alienation from those they love.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, your own Son had nowhere to lay his head, and at his birth there was no room at the inn. Receive into your care all who are shut out of the benefits of society. Fill the hungry with good things, shelter the homeless, defend the refugee, the prisoner of conscience, and the persecuted.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Almighty God, who by the incarnation of your Son gathered into one things earthly and heavenly, we remember before you that communion of saints who rejoice with us today, but upon another shore, and in a greater light, that multitude whom no one can number, whose hope was in the Word made flesh, and with whom in Jesus Christ we are one forevermore....*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, as we prepare to celebrate the birth of our Lord, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your Word, and move us by your Spirit to magnify your name; 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**