

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

*The 4th Sunday after Epiphany
31 January 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: Jesus said: "If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples."

P: "You shall know the truth, and the truth shall make you free."

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid; cleanse the thoughts of our hearts by the inspiration of your Holy Spirit, that we may perfectly love you, and worthily magnify your holy name, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, world without end.

Holy One, your mercy is wider than our wandering and deeper than our sin. Bring light to our eyes and show us what we keep hidden in darkness. Save us from our folly, from failure to be true, and from battles we fight within ourselves, chasing ambitions that never satisfy, living for things that perish in the grasping. Forgive us, O Lord, and forgive the world that makes us this way.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Living God, in Christ you make all things new. Transform the poverty of our nature by the riches of your grace, and in the renewal of our lives make known your glory; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish, but have everlasting life." 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, the source of all truth, prepare our hearts to receive your Word. Silence within 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 111 (*Praise for God's Wonderful Works*)

Alleluia!

I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart,
in the company of the upright, in the congregation.

Great are the works of the Lord,
studied by all who delight in them.

Full of honour and majesty is his work,
and his righteousness endures for ever.

He has gained renown by his wonderful deeds;
the Lord is gracious and merciful.

He provides food for those who fear him;
he is ever mindful of his covenant.

He has shown his people the power of his works,
in giving them the heritage of the nations.

The works of his hands are faithful and just;
all his precepts are trustworthy.

They are established for ever and ever,
to be performed with faithfulness and uprightness.

He sent redemption to his people.

He has commanded his covenant forever.

Holy and awesome is his name.

The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom;
all those who practise it have a good understanding.

His praise endures forever.

(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: 21-28 (*Jesus heals a Man with an Unclean Spirit*)

They went to Capernaum; and when the sabbath came, Jesus entered the synagogue and taught. They were astounded at his teaching, for he taught them as one having authority, and not as the scribes.

Just then there was in their synagogue a man with an unclean spirit, and he cried out, 'What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.'

But Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!' And the unclean spirit, throwing him into convulsions and crying with a loud voice, came out of him.

They were all amazed, and they kept on asking one another, 'What is this? A new teaching—with authority! He commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.'

At once his fame began to spread throughout the surrounding region of Galilee.

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Mark 1:25 "*Jesus rebuked him, saying, 'Be silent, and come out of him!'*"

Are we too 'worldly-wise' to think invisible spirits and demons might exist? We're smart and modern. We know better than *they* did 'back then', don't we? But let's set that thought aside for a moment.

Foul moods possess us from time to time. Fiendish thoughts and demonic desires are infectious. They spread like the Covid virus. "Calm down. Don't be so angry," says a friend with growing irritation. But we can't calm down. We can't control the hurricane raging inside us anymore than we can control today's weather. It grips us like a vice and infects those around us.

What's more, who can stop the rush of romantic rapture when Cupid's Arrow strikes? No one *chooses* to feel this delirium. It invades us without our permission, unseating our reason.

Psychologists speak of 'panic attacks', as though panic were a bandit waiting in a dark alley to mug us – which, in a way, it is. Mental illness can so disfigure someone's 'normal' personality that it's as though an alien power has invaded them. And which of us hasn't endured weeks, months, even years of gloom, asking ourselves, "Why can't I shake this sadness? It's not *me*. But it has a vicious hold on me."

So, let's allow for the possibility that, in fact, they *did* know better 'back then' than smart, modern people do now. We all have our 'demons', don't we?

Jesus separates the demon from the man. That's the first step to healing. "Come out of him," he shouts. "And the unclean spirit, convulsing him and crying with a loud voice, came out of him," says St Mark.

"What medicine is this?" the people ask. "He cures with a word, spoken with authority. And what authority! He commands unclean spirits. Spineless scribes can't do that. They never speak this way. This is a *new* teaching, one with *authority*!"

There's power in teaching, in saying the right word in the right way at the right time. It has power to excite or to irritate, to enlighten or deceive, to heal or to wound. Words like 'I forgive you' or 'I condemn you', 'I love you' or 'I hate you', can end a war or cause one, save someone's life or destroy it.

Truth spoken with authority creates and clarifies the world we live and move in. But lies spread like a virus, harming our health and integrity. It's no accident that, elsewhere, Jesus calls the Demon-in-Chief "a liar, and the father of lies" (St John 8:44).

The hateful, harmful power of the lie is all-too evident in our world right now. The last U.S. President told tens of thousands of lies from the Oval Office. The biggest and most dangerous one persists: "I won by a landslide. The election was stolen from me!" No, it was not. The spread of this disease can only be stopped with a dose of truth's vaccine. The Big Lie infects millions by hijacking their minds the way the Covid virus hijacks the cells in our bodies to replicate itself. The Big Lie hijacks the body politic, too, replicating itself through Twitter and Fox News. It incites violence.

Lies have virulent variants. "Covid is a hoax. Climate change is fake news. The Holocaust never happened. Other races are rancid. White supremacy rules!"

The 'spirit' animating these treacherous lies is indeed an '*unclean spirit*'. The world it creates is evil. Defiling people's minds, it leads them to act in vicious error, boldly, with wickedness and harm. Someone in the grip of delusions as virulent as those spread by 'Q-Anon' is the pathetic victim of this '*unclean spirit*'.

When Jesus confronted the man afflicted by an '*unclean spirit*' in the synagogue that day, what was his first word to him? "*Be Silent!*" He uses a word that means something like, "Muzzle Yourself." In other words, "Wear a mask and stop the spread." Only truth can purge a lying, unclean spirit, setting its victim free and healing the damage it caused. And truth possesses an authority that is all its own.

Physicians can be healers too, of course. Their white coats and ID badges display their authority to prescribe drugs and perform surgery. They put 'M.D.' after their names. They hang their certificates on the walls of their clinics. These are their '*credentials*'. We want them to have them; for the word '*credential*' comes from the Latin word '*credo*', meaning 'I believe'. A credential is what you present to make yourself '*believable*', trustworthy, credible.

But what astonished the bystanders that day wasn't Jesus' teaching certificate or his license to heal. His credentials – his trustworthiness and credibility – could never be certified from 'without' in that way, neither by the crowds in the synagogue that day, nor by 'smart moderns' like us. All his authority rose from *within*. For truth's authority lives within the truth itself.

When Jesus talked about healing, he healed. When he spoke of forgiveness, he forgave. When he summoned his friends to follow him, they followed. His authority comes from his *origin* in the heart of God the Father, and nowhere else.

The power of Jesus' authority has nothing to do with physical force or self-assertion. It has everything to do with truthful speech and right action. But in a world infected by lies, truthful speech and right action invite suffering and persecution. Willingness to suffer for the truth must come from a strong *love* for truth. But the only love strong enough to heal a world infected by the 'Father of Lies' is the love who spoke the world into being in the first place.

This is why Christians insist that Jesus is the very truth of God in our midst. For he uses his voice not for self-assertion or self-expression or self-aggrandisement, but for forgiving the sinner, rebuking the 'demonic', defending the outcast, issuing his summons to follow in his way, and then laying down his life to make it so.

His death exhibits *God's* truth. That's why God raised him at Easter, to exhibit this truth forever. His wounds are his credentials. His strong and loving Word of Truth, in speech and action, have all the authority of God. They cast out the lies in our lives. They re-create the world, healing us for all eternity.

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God, our maker and redeemer, we offer you praise for your love and blessing. For the life you give us to live in this world, with joy and purpose; for the life you promise us in Christ, already begun and still to be perfected.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of the Church and God of all nations, your love is without limit or end. Enlarge your Church's vision of your redeeming purpose. Make us ready to learn from those whose customs differ from ours and help us to share with them the truth you have entrusted to us. Let neither pride nor hardness of heart make us despise any for whom Christ also died or injure anyone who bears your image.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are sick or lonely, for victims of injustice, and for those who, because of their own intense suffering, doubt your existence or question your goodness. Make us patient for the coming of a vaccine and the return of our normal lives. Help us to be caring with each other, helpful to strangers, and kind to ourselves.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are elderly and infirm; as their strength diminishes, increase their confidence in your love, O Lord.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for victims of war, famine and poverty; and for all whose hearts weep with grief for those they have loved and lost in death. Comfort their deep sorrow, we pray, and heal them with your peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of all nations, we pray for peace and prosperity, sound government and good laws, truth in high places, justice in our relations with each other, and a spirit of service to all the world.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering those who have died, with thanks for the communion of saints and with hope in the resurrection to eternal life, 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

God of saving truth, in Jesus Christ you announce our freedom and summon us to follow him. We marvel at the grace and power of your Word. Enlighten us also to see the beauty of the Gospel and strengthen us to live in your way; through Jesus Christ our Lord who taught us to pray.

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**