

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

Christmas Day
25 December 2020

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

Opening Words

L: The Word became flesh and dwelt among us,

P: And we beheld his glory. Alleluia!

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession Eternal God, you sent your Son to be born among us that we might be born again to newness of life. Fill us with the wonder of this holy day. Help us to treasure in our hearts the good news of Christmas, that our lives may show your great and gentle mercy. Praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Lord of all mercy, through Jesus Christ you call us to grow in grace and favour. Have we closed our eyes to your glory, our minds to your truth, and our hearts to your Spirit? Enter our hearts and be born in us today. Assure of your forgiveness and grant us your peace.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, you wonderfully created and yet more wonderfully restored our human nature. Grant that we may share the divine life of your Son Jesus Christ, who humbled himself to share our humanity, and now lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever more. Amen

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The grace of God has come, bringing salvation to all." 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 Loving One, through the words of Holy Scripture, let your Word be born in us this day; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 98 (*Word of praise for God's salvation*)

O sing to the Lord a new song,
 for he has done marvellous things.
 His right hand and his holy arm
 have gained him victory.
 The Lord has made known his victory;
 he has revealed his vindication in the sight of the nations.
 He has remembered his steadfast love and faithfulness
 to the house of Israel.
 All the ends of the earth have seen
 the victory of our God.
 Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth;
 break forth into joyous song and sing praises.
 Sing praises to the Lord with the lyre,
 with the lyre and the sound of melody.
 With trumpets and the sound of the horn
 make a joyful noise before the King, the Lord.
 Let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
 the world and those who live in it.
 Let the floods clap their hands;
 let the hills sing together for joy
 at the presence of the Lord, for he is coming
 to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world with righteousness,
 and the peoples with equity.

(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: 1-14 (*St John unfolds the Mystery of the Incarnation*)

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. The same was in the beginning with God.

All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made. In him was life; and the life was the light of men. And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world.

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not. He came unto his own, and his own received him not. But as many as received him, to them gave he power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name: Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth.

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 1:5 *“The light shines in the darkness and the darkness has not overcome it.”*

One of life’s little trials happens on these dark winter mornings when we switch on the light. At first it blinds us. We squint and shrink from its brightness. Our whole body takes offence, as if to cry out, “Are you crazy? Return me to the comfort of night at once!”

Instead, we stumble down the hall. Groggy, we bump into things, cursing not the darkness but the very light by which we see, or try to see, the world. But by the time we’re at breakfast, reading the cereal box and glancing at the clock, we can scarcely believe that puny light bulb has the power to blind and disorient us. How could it do that? But it did.

Cartoonists show a light bulb floating over someone’s head to indicate a ‘bright idea’. Mystics speak of moments of ‘illumination’ when ignorance gives way to insight. Others call it ‘enlightenment’. Light has power to scatter darkness and ignorance, to drag us from our sleepy shadow lands, to see and be seen, to see the truth about ourselves and the truth about the world we live in.

St John says that this is what the birth of Jesus Christ is all about. “The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.”

“I dare you to open your eyes,” says John. “See the glory of the ‘Word made Flesh’. Open your eyes (who cares if you squint and stumble?). Prepare to be changed

forever. For this is what the birth of Jesus Christ is all about. It's the very light of God wrenching us awake, dragging us from darkness into the light."

Light – ordinary daylight – enthralled the medieval Church. Light is not a solid you can hold, not liquid you can pour, nor a gas you can trap in a jar. Light passes through air and glass. For medieval Christians, it was a symbol of God's energy – untouchable, uncontainable, in a sense unknowable – but very, very real. That's why Gothic Cathedrals in Europe made room for huge windows of stained glass. They wanted to let in the light, the divine energy.

What's more, they saw in the way light passes through stained glass a perfect symbol of God's incarnation in Jesus Christ. Light passes through it without damaging or breaking it. Yet as it passes through, light gives its radiance to the glass. In darkness, the window is opaque and black. It needs daylight to be "lit up". Only then can we see it as it is. Only then can we admire its beauty.

Medieval glass makers thought, "Isn't this how God meets us in Jesus Christ? Doesn't God 'light up' *this* life like none other? And isn't it breathtaking to behold? The way he lives, the way he loves, even the way he dies! Here's a dazzling display of human life the way it's meant to be lived, fully and completely. A life full of risk, yes, but founded completely on love. In him, God lights up this human life the way sunlight lights up a stained-glass window."

But they noticed something else too. When light passes through a stained-glass window, it doesn't just change the look of the window, it also changes the look of the light. Colourless beams of light become shafts of blue and green and red. When they saw this, medieval glass makers just nodded their heads. "Yes, that's how the light of God is stained as it shines through Jesus," they said. "Stained with the blood and tears and violence of the worst that humans can do."

"This is judgment," said Jesus, "that the light has come into the world, and people loved darkness rather than light, because their deeds were evil."

That's why those Cathedral builders saved the biggest and brightest windows to show, paradoxically, the darkest hour in the gospel story, when Jesus cries from the cross and all seems lost. For that's when God's love shines brightest.

God's incarnation in Jesus Christ doesn't just change how we look at human life, it changes how we look at God. Jesus' wounds are red and deep. They're God's wounds too, badges of God's passion for us. That, and that alone, gives St John the nerve to say that no darkness – *none* – will ever extinguish this light.

But what nerve it takes to believe this. If we relied only on our own 'opinion' (that puny 'night light' we shine on the world), darkness would overwhelm us. We'd return to the comfort of night, to the long sleep of ignorance and death.

We approach the end of a hard, hard year. What made it so hard? It's not just the turmoil caused by the pandemic, it's also what this virus shows us about ourselves. We

are so vulnerable, so prone to loneliness, so easily undone. This is our human condition. But this is the condition God shares with us.

Others may whistle in the dark and believe only in themselves. But I can't. And I won't. We need God's light to lighten our darkness, to yank us from the shadowlands of sleep into the disorienting light that shines from Bethlehem to Calvary. Even though a menacing darkness surrounds us, God will not let it have the last word. Only *God's* Word gets to have that.

That is why, in one of Toronto's poorest neighbourhoods (the kind of place Jesus was born), someone scrawled a piece of graffiti one Christmas Eve. "When we light a candle at midnight," it said, "we say to the darkness, 'we beg to differ'."

Prayers of Intercession

O Son of God, yet born of Mary; the chosen Christ, and yet our brother; eternal Word, yet a child without speech; clothed in glory, yet wrapped in swaddling clothes: with the prophets who foretold you, with the angels who disclosed you, with the shepherds who beheld you, with the wise men who found you, we praise your name, and give you glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church, hidden in our homes today, but seen and loved by you. We pray for Christians everywhere, and for all who desire to know and love you. Keep your Church inspired by your truth, immersed in your love, and always ready heed you call.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Redeeming God, we bring before you the deep divisions of our world. By your Spirit, temper human arrogance and pride; deepen true love and understanding in every heart and nation, that we may be united in the bonds of peace as one human family.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of all beauty, your will is that your creatures should enjoy the bounty of Creation and the life you have given us live. Bless those whose joy is robbed by hunger and poverty, disease and oppression. Bless the little we have done to help. Multiply it, in your mercy, to serve the needs of those unknown to us, but known and loved by you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of compassion, bless those with whom we live, and those far away who we long to be with, but cannot. Put into our homes and hearts today the happiness that is

born from true and faithful love; and the joy that comes when we make each other happy.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Prince of Peace, at whose birth the angels sang of peace on earth, place your peace in our hearts and in the words of our own mouths, that we may speak its blessings out loud, in simple words of kindness to each other.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, who came to dwell with us that we may live eternally with you, we remember those who have died. Give rest unto your servants, and let light perpetual shine upon them....*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Light of life, you came in flesh, born into human pain and joy, and gave us power to be your children. Grant us faith, O Christ, to see your presence among us, so that all creation may sing new songs of gladness and walk in the way of peace.

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**