

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

Christmas Eve
24 December 2020

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

Opening Words

L: Behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy.

P: For unto you is born this day a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession O Lord Jesus Christ, highest and holiest, who humbled yourself to share our birth and our death. Bring us with the shepherds and wise men to kneel before your lowly cradle. Join our voices to the heavenly host who cry, 'Glory to God in the highest'.

But first, we confide in your mercy and confess our sins. The light of your truth reveals the darkness in our hearts, the hatreds we house within them, and the despair we nurse there. Forgive the harm we do to ourselves and each other, and the good we fail to do. You have promised that your light will never leave us or forsake us, and that nothing can change your great love in Jesus Christ. We claim this promise today and open our hearts to you.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Almighty God, who long ago sent the angels in the midnight hour to tell the shepherds Christ was born in Bethlehem, come to us this night, and stir our hearts to hear again their message of love in Christ. And though there was no room in Bethlehem's inn, make room in our hearts to receive his peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "In Christ all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell." 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, as your Son Jesus Christ entered the world in darkness, when all was still, so enter our lives this night; through Jesus Christ our Lord.
Amen

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 96 (*A hymn of Praise to God*)

O sing to the Lord a new song;
 sing to the Lord, all the earth.
 Sing to the Lord, bless his name;
 tell of his salvation from day to day.
 Declare his glory among the nations,
 his marvellous works among all the peoples.
 For great is the Lord, and greatly to be praised;
 he is to be revered above all gods.
 For all the gods of the peoples are idols,
 but the Lord made the heavens.
 Honour and majesty are before him;
 strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.
 Ascribe to the Lord, O families of the peoples,
 ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
 Ascribe to the Lord the glory due his name;
 bring an offering and come into his courts.
 Worship the Lord in holy splendour;
 tremble before him, all the earth.
 Say among the nations, 'The Lord is king!
 The world is firmly established; it shall never be moved.
 He will judge the peoples with equity.'
 Let the heavens be glad, and let the earth rejoice;
 let the sea roar, and all that fills it;
 let the field exult, and everything in it.
 Then shall all the trees of the forest sing for joy
 before the Lord; for he is coming,
 for he is coming to judge the earth.
 He will judge the world with righteousness,
 and the peoples with his truth.

(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 2: 1-20 (*The birth of Jesus Christ according to St Luke*)

And it came to pass in those days that there went out a decree from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed. (And this taxing was first made when Cyrenius was governor of Syria.)

And all went to be taxed, every one into his own city. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, out of the city of Nazareth, into Judaea, unto the city of David, which is called Bethlehem; (because he was of the house and lineage of David:) To be taxed with Mary his espoused wife, being great with child.

And so it was, that, while they were there, the days were accomplished that she should be delivered. And she brought forth her firstborn son, and wrapped him in swaddling clothes, and laid him in a manger; because there was no room for them in the inn.

And there were in the same country shepherds abiding in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night. And, lo, the angel of the Lord came upon them, and the glory of the Lord shone round about them: and they were sore afraid.

And the angel said unto them, Fear not: for, behold, I bring you good tidings of great joy, which shall be to all people. For unto you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, which is Christ the Lord. And this shall be a sign unto you; Ye shall find the babe wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger.

And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God, and saying, Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men.

And it came to pass, as the angels were gone away from them into heaven, the shepherds said one to another, Let us now go even unto Bethlehem, and see this thing which is come to pass, which the Lord hath made known unto us.

And they came with haste, and found Mary, and Joseph, and the babe lying in a manger.

And when they had seen it, they made known abroad the saying which was told them concerning this child. And all they that heard it wondered at those things which were told them by the shepherds.

But Mary kept all these things, and pondered them in her heart.

And the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all the things that they had heard and seen, as it was told unto them.

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 2:1 *A decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be taxed.*

We picture the Christmas scene as a 'tableau' or still-life, the kind you see on Christmas cards. All is calm and still. Even the animals hold their breath. But this stillness is a fiction. A surge of activity precedes the birth of Jesus Christ. Everyone is 'on the move'.

The Christmas story begins, not in Bethlehem, but in far-away Rome. Caesar Augustus orders a 'poll tax'. The Word of Rome descends from the high imperial throne, to senior bureaucrats, down to junior bureaucrats, until it arrives on the outskirts of Empire, where it lands with a thump, in triplicate, on the desk of a minor clerk in the sub-office of the Department of Public Works housed in Galilee.

The Word of Rome *moves*. And with domino effect it causes the long march of Mary and Joseph from Nazareth to Bethlehem, to an inn with 'no vacancy', to a stable in the back alley.

But Mary and Joseph aren't the only ones 'on the move'. Angels sweep down from heaven to earth. Shepherds abandon their flocks in the fields. They run to Bethlehem and fall at the feet of the Holy Family. Exotic kings from the East pursue a bright star. They refuse to rest until they arrive where the star itself rests over the place where the child lies.

So, there's not much 'stillness' in the story of Jesus' birth. All the main players are 'on the move' until they reach the manger and 'close the gap' between themselves and the Christ Child. Only then does peace descend. ('All is calm, all is bright.'). Only then is the journey complete.

We find gaps in every relationship. Psychologists notice how people vary their connections to each other according to the kind of gap that exists between them. Desire and attraction try to draw them closer together. Fear and repulsion move them father apart. The pandemic has only widened the gaps we feel in each other's presence.

Between husband and wife, child and parent, brother and sister, teacher and student, employer and employee, citizen and refugee, friend and stranger, there are always gaps. Some are so slim you can scarcely believe they're there. Others are so wide there's barely any connection at all. It takes trust and love to narrow these gaps. Coercion and fear only increase them.

The loud Word of Rome may kick start all that noisy movement in the Christmas story, but really, it's the hushed descent of the Word of God who truly 'closes the gap', creating peace and rest.

The gap Jesus Christ closes is the gap between God and us. It's the sin that separates you and me. It's the breach between the good we long for and the failures we feel we are, between the love we desire and the fear that makes us flee from love. For

God is 'on the move', too, at Christmas. God 'closes the gap' between himself and us by stepping into history to wear our human dress. God makes himself at one with us in the Christ. This is our peace. This is our Sabbath rest. This the movement that matters at Christmas.

One hundred and two years ago, on Christmas Day in the trenches of France, the Great War was entering its first of many muddy, bloody winters. Two selfish empires had sent their youngest and strongest to kill and be killed. Their quarrel amounted to a hundred yards of mud, the gap between two trenches.

There they sat on Christmas Day, poised to do violence. Except on this day there was a Christmas truce. All shelling had ceased. In a quiet moment, from the German trench, came the strains of "Silent Night". (*Stille Nacht* is, after all, a German carol.) Soon the English answered them in song. Someone, no one knows who, but someone made the first move. He put down his gun and walked unarmed into no-man's land, his hands raised not in surrender but in greeting. They say the trenches emptied that day. Soldiers from two arrogant empires, for few short hours, closed the gap called 'no-man's land'.

Christmas is an open invitation to close in on Bethlehem, to close the gap between us and God, between ourselves and each other, between our ideals and frequent failures.

We can do this. We can do this because God long ago made the first move. He has taken up his dwelling in *our* no man's land. He comes to us, unarmed, in the child of Bethlehem. Not in surrender, not in attack, but in love and grace to rule.

In Jesus Christ, born at Christmas, lies the forgiveness of sins, the world's true peace, and our Sabbath rest. In him, *our* life's journey is complete.

Prayers of Intercession

Holy Lord, you entered the world in silence, a child of humble birth, born of the Virgin Mary. In your face, we behold the Father's glory; in your Spirit, we share your gift of salvation. Let our lives be gifts of praise to you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for your Church, in this and every land, that the glad tidings of our Saviour's birth may be proclaimed with joy and power. Rekindle in the hearts of your people the faith that is strong to move mountains, the hope that shall never be ashamed, and the love that reconciles the world to you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of truth, your prophets foretold that your Son should be called the Prince of Peace. We pray for the peace of the world. Break down barriers of pride and greed,

selfishness and mistrust, that divide nation from nation, and race from race. Give the world a just and lasting peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for all who are distressed by grief and pain, especially those nearest to us, whom we name in our hearts before you. Comfort them in their afflictions; restore them, if it is your will, to health and strength; provide for their bodies and their souls; and bring them at last to abundant and eternal life.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We praise you for the joy of Christmas, the joy from heaven to earth come down. We pray for those whose joy has been taken away – by grief, in those who mourn the death of a beloved one; by hunger, in those who clamour for bread; by poverty, in those made destitute by unemployment; and by loneliness, in those who cannot gather with the ones they love. Give them the strength of the One who was born to bear our griefs and carry our sorrows.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of glory, your splendour shines from a manger in Bethlehem, where the Light of the world is humbly born into the darkness of human night. Open our eyes to Christ's presence in the shadows of our world, so that we, like him, may become beacons of your justice, and defenders of all for whom there is no room.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We remember with gratitude those who no longer share our Christmas joy on earth but know the greater joy of heaven. Give rest unto your servants with your saints, where there is neither pain, nor sorrow, nor sighing, but life everlasting....(*keep a time of silence in God's presence*)....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

All glory in the highest be to you, through Christ, the Son of your favour, in the anointing love of your Spirit, this night and 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**