

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

The First Sunday after Epiphany
(The Baptism of the Lord)
9 January 2022

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

Opening Words

L: Sing and bless God's name; tell glad news of salvation from day to day.

P: Proclaim God's glory to the nations, God's marvellous deeds to all peoples.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, you are so high above us we cannot comprehend you, yet so deep within us that we cannot escape you. Strengthen and bless us in the peace of Jesus Christ. Grant that we, being born of water and the Spirit, may proclaim with our mouths our love for his truth, and show in our lives the truth of his love. Glory be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Lord Jesus Christ, by your baptism you sanctified creation and opened the door to new life for all who are baptised in you. Do we turn our backs on you and on each other? Do we nurse ancient wounds and hold on to petty grudges? We confess that we are hostage to our own destructive habits. Forgive us and rescue us. Hold before us the truth of our baptism and assure us that you have claimed us forever as your own.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Gracious God, at the baptism of Jesus you revealed him to be your Son and anointed him with the Holy Spirit. Keep all who are born of water and the Spirit sure of your love and faithful to their calling; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "In Christ all the fullness of God is 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, lead us in the way, instruct us in the truth, and fill us with the life that is eternal; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 29 (*God's glory is seen in the splendour of the storm*)

Ascribe to the Lord, O heavenly beings,
 ascribe to the Lord glory and strength.
 Ascribe to the Lord the glory of his name;
 worship the Lord in holy splendour.
 The voice of the Lord is over the waters;
 the God of glory thunders,
 the Lord, over mighty waters.
 The voice of the Lord is powerful;
 the voice of the Lord is full of majesty.
 The voice of the Lord breaks the cedars;
 the Lord breaks the cedars of Lebanon.
 He makes Lebanon skip like a calf,
 and Sirion like a young wild ox.
 The voice of the Lord flashes forth flames of fire.
 The voice of the Lord shakes the wilderness;
 the Lord shakes the wilderness of Kadesh.
 The voice of the Lord causes the oaks to whirl,
 and strips the forest bare;
 and in his temple all say, 'Glory!'
 The Lord sits enthroned over the flood;
 the Lord sits enthroned as king for ever.
 May the Lord give strength to his people!
 May the Lord bless his people with peace!

(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 3: 15-17, 21-22 (*John the Baptist baptises Jesus in the Jordan.*)

As the people were filled with expectation, and all were questioning in their hearts concerning John, whether he might be the Messiah, John answered all of them by

saying, 'I baptise you with water; but one who is more powerful than I is coming; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandals. He will baptise you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing-fork is in his hand, to clear his threshing-floor and to gather the wheat into his granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.'

Now when all the people were baptised, and when Jesus also had been baptised and was praying, the heaven was opened, and the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove. And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Luke 3: 22 *"You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased."*

Some of us would give our right arms to hear such things spoken about us, to know with the same strong conviction 'who we are' and 'what we must do' with our lives. It's a burden of modern life that many of us walk in circles, drifting, feeling no call or claim upon us, unsure what we should *do* with ourselves, yet also condemned to have to choose *something* to do.

You may remember that every episode of "Mission Impossible" began with the thin voice of a tiny tape recorder. "Good morning, Mr Phelps. Your mission, *should you decide to accept it...*", it would say. And then the 'impossible mission' would be described. "Infiltrate the bad guys' secret lair, steal the nuclear codes, and do it all within the hour, minus time for commercials," or something like that.

But for Jesus, the voice never said, "should you decide to accept it." It only said, "You are beloved, you please me..." His impossible mission was his answer to the voice. Jesus didn't hover over his calling the way we might hover over the many brands of toothpaste on a shop shelf. "This one has fluoride, so that's good...on the other hand, this one removes plaque...oh, but that one removes coffee stains. I may as well have *that* one." Such choices always have a feeling of 'whim' and 'impulse' about them, don't they? We chose *this*, but we could just as well have chosen *that*.

We've been reared in a market economy. It trained us to expend all our 'choosing energy' on choices that don't really matter. It taught us to feel our choices are *freely* chosen to the extent that we could just as easily have chosen something else instead. Because then we're not *bound* by anything, you see? But that's a shallow idea of freedom, and it leads to a life where no choice matters more than any other. A deeper idea of freedom says we're most free when we're *bound*, not by whim, but by choices that align with who we are; or better, with who we must become.

I don't know if adolescents still visit Guidance Counsellors as they approach the end of High School. If they do, and if their experience is anything like mine was, the Counsellor will say something like, "Well, you could pursue *this* career, or you could look for *that* kind of job, or you could explore another sort of opportunity...really, it's all up to *you*."

But what does that mean, "It's all up to *me*?" Why must it all be thrown back upon me? Doesn't this beg a deeper, burdensome question? Not 'what should I do with my life?', but 'who *am* I, then?' – and doesn't that question, 'Who am I?', shatter into a hundred others, like crockery smashed on the floor? Questions like: "What am I good for? What do I *like* to do? And why is it different from what I feel I *should* do? Who am I answerable to? Just me? Is there no claim upon my life that I can answer with joy?"

All those questions come flying like mad hornets from a single nest, from being told, "*It's all up to you*." I might have put those questions to the Guidance Counsellor, but he'd have stared right back at me, shrugged his shoulders, and said, "It's all up to *you*..."

Jesus waded into the Jordan River, shoulder to shoulder with heaving humanity, believing but not yet fully knowing, imagining but not fully seeing, who he is and what he must do, and where it will lead him. Many of us have hunches, dreams, visions of an ideal self in an ideal world, but none of us sees the future in a pure, clear light. Only as we look back, as if in a rear-view mirror, may we see some necessity or purpose in the path we took. But it doesn't feel that way as we tread the path in a forward direction. It feels like we're making it up as we go along.

There were times when Jesus seemed driven and unstoppable, his path lit up like lightning. "He set his face to go to Jerusalem." He said, "I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom". He said, "the Son of Man must suffer and be killed and on the third day rise – and don't think you can stop me". But there were times of retreat and reflection too, times for pause and prayer, and times when the fog of frustration fell across his path, leading at last to the darkness of Gethsemane. "Must it be this way?" he cried. He called that darkness "Father", threw his face to the ground, and said, "Let me live out your will, and die". The only light he could see in that moment was cast by the torches of soldiers, led there by Judas to arrest him.

So, Jesus' baptism, and the divine accolade that came with it, did not give him clairvoyant vision. But neither did it leave him in darkness. Jesus knew who he was from the time of his baptism: "You are my Son, the beloved." There was light in this knowledge. And by that light he saw his calling. And being bound by his calling, he felt his way to the work God called him to do – rather as we must do too.

What strange times we're living through. Democracy is disintegrating. The climate is collapsing. Institutions we once trusted are in terminal turmoil. Poverty, sorrow, and despair live cheek-by-jowl with wealth, arrogance, and conspicuous consumption. And that's just a typical Monday.

Ours is a Dark Age and we're bequeathing its darkness to our children. What kind of legacy is that? Not as teachers of wisdom, but with an ineffectual shrug of our shoulders, we say to them, "It's all up to you. Good luck with that and don't blame us."

Our Dark Age is made darker by the foolish fiction that there's no darkness in *our* deeds, in *our* choices, and in *our* way of life. It's made darker, too, by the loud lies of the secular, technological power brokers who rule us, beginning with the multi-billionaires who wield too much political clout, and who insist that *they* and their silicon gadgets are the world's true bearers of Salvation's Light. But there's another name for a bearer of false light: Lucifer.

So, here we are, staring down the tunnel of another year. I don't know about you, but I've had enough of fear and panic. It's time to be brave in our calling. It's time to bear some risk, to risk living up to who we are and what we must do. I want us to find our courage and to live again. Yes, sure, there's a time to be gentle and timid, but there's also a time to be fierce and brave. *Jesus* knew that.

To that end, my mind goes back to a memory I'm too young to have. It's a memory of Churchill in the British House of Commons on 13 May 1940, a very dark hour indeed.

"I have nothing to offer but blood, toil, tears, and sweat" he said. "We shall fight on the beaches, we shall fight on the landing grounds, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets, we shall fight in the hills. We shall never surrender," he said.

Why did he say this? He said it to comfort his people, because to comfort someone is *not* to coddle them, but to strengthen them for what they must do and to encourage them for what they must endure. *That* is true comfort. He was bolstering his people, not so much by telling them what to *do* as by reminding them who they *are*.

Well, *you* were baptised too. You have a part to play, but it's not all up to you. You are a child of the Most High. You are beloved. You're destined to know the pleasure of God in you. *Never, never surrender that.*

Prayers of Intercession

We pray to God the Father, through our Lord Jesus Christ, in the power of the Holy Spirit.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church, beginning with ourselves, and for all who long to gather once again in your sanctuary. O Lord, you have been our dwelling place in all generations. So teach us to number our days that we may gain a heart of wisdom. By your Spirit, enliven us; that in your Church's work and service we may know the new life you offer in Jesus Christ.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for an end to terrorism and lawlessness, state oppression and torture, for truth and compassion in government, for peace between the nations, all religions, and all ethnic groups – in our own land, in every corridor of earthly power, and in our own hearts. O God, send your peace in our time.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for all who are in trouble, illness, or grief, for all who cry out to you, especially those most dear to us. We name them before you in our hearts. Work your grace in our midst, O Lord, and weave from every human sorrow the miracle of your salvation. Bring health and peace to those who call upon you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of all times and places, whose Son stills the storm and soothes the frantic heart; bring us hope as we live through these days of uncertainty; give us courage to endure the conditions we must face in this pandemic; and grant us patience to await the coming of better days.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord of heaven and earth, we remember with thanksgiving, and commend to your love, those faithful souls who, having served you here on earth, are now at rest in your presence. Give us grace so to follow their faith and good example that we may share their joy, and at last be named with your saints in glory everlasting...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, renew our spirits and draw our hearts closer to you; and, that our lives may not feel like a burden to us, help us to feel your pleasure filling every corner of our hearts. We pray the Lord's Prayer.

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**