

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

*15th Sunday after Pentecost
10:30 a.m.
13 September 2020*

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

Opening Words

L: O Lord, let the light of your face shine upon us,

P: And put your gladness in our hearts.

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, for we come to worship and adore you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, our one true and living God.

Merciful One, into the peace of your presence we bring our restless lives, and we confess our brokenness and need. Deliver us from our captivity to arrogant pride, our envy of others, and our secret self-loathing. Free us from the sin we know only too well, and the sin we scarcely recognise. Help us to be truthful about ourselves, that we may become true to you. Heal our troubled hearts, and guide us in the way we should go; for we need your life and strength in ours.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us;

P: Christ, have mercy upon us;

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, help us to forgive as you have forgiven us. Help us to trust you, even when hope is fading. Help us to take up our cross daily and follow you in your redeeming work; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "With the Lord there is mercy, and plenteous redemption." 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 Lord, in the hearing of your Word, teach us the truth that makes us free; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 114 (*The wonders of God at the Exodus from Egypt*)

When Israel went out from Egypt,
 the house of Jacob from a people of strange language,
 Judah became God's sanctuary,
 Israel his dominion.
 The sea looked and fled;
 Jordan turned back.
 The mountains skipped like rams,
 the hills like lambs.
 Why is it, O sea, that you flee?
 O Jordan, that you turn back?
 O mountains, that you skip like rams?
 O hills, like lambs?
 Tremble, O earth, at the presence of the Lord,
 at the presence of the God of Jacob,
 who turns the rock into a pool of water,
 the flint into a spring of water.

(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

Exodus 14: 10-16, 19-22 (*The people of Israel cross the sea to freedom.*)

As Pharaoh drew near, the Israelites looked back, and there were the Egyptians advancing on them.

In great fear the Israelites cried out to the Lord. They said to Moses, 'Was it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? What have you done to us, bringing us out of Egypt? Is this not the very thing we told you in Egypt, "Let us alone and let us serve the Egyptians"? For it would have been better for us to serve the Egyptians than to die in the wilderness.'

But Moses said to the people, 'Do not be afraid, stand firm, and see the deliverance that the Lord will accomplish for you today; for the Egyptians whom you see today you shall never see again. The Lord will fight for you, and you have only to keep still.'

Then the Lord said to Moses, 'Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward. But you lift up your staff, and stretch out your hand over the sea and divide it, that the Israelites may go into the sea on dry ground.'

The angel of God who was going before the Israelite army moved and went behind them; and the pillar of cloud moved from in front of them and took its place behind them. It came between the army of Egypt and the army of Israel. And so the cloud was there with the darkness, and it lit up the night; one did not come near the other all night.

Then Moses stretched out his hand over the sea. The Lord drove the sea back by a strong east wind all night, and turned the sea into dry land; and the waters were divided. The Israelites went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall for them on their right and on their left.

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Exodus 14:15 *"Why do you cry out to me? Tell the Israelites to go forward..."*

Israel's 'great escape' comes to a screeching halt on the shores of the Red Sea. Waves lap at their feet. There's no way forward. Pharaoh's army is in hot pursuit. They're pinned down. Will they die right there by the Egyptian sword? Will they flee into the sea and drown? Maybe they should wave the white flag and shuffle back to slavery, their legs bound in irons, their heads hanging in shame?

With angry sarcasm, the people blame Moses. "Oy Vey, Moishe! So, you thought you'd bring us here to die, did you? What, not enough graves in Egypt?"

Moses ignores the sarcasm. "You'll never see those Egyptians again," he boldly predicts. "The Lord will fight for you. Just keep still!" And he gets on his knees and prays.

Bad idea! God shouts, "Why do you cry out to *me*? Tell the Israelites to go forward!" In other words, "*Get moving!*" Or as a rabbi put it a few centuries later: "At that hour Moses spent a long time in prayer, and the Holy One, blessed be He, said to him, 'My beloved children are drowning in the sea – and you waste time before me in lengthy prayer?'"

Israel's exodus to freedom is God's doing. But it can't take effect unless Moses and the people play their part too.

We all want an exodus. Hardship and sorrow imprison us. In Jean-Paul Sartre's play, "No Exit", hell is confinement for all eternity in a little room with others, with no chance of an 'exodus'. "*L'infer, c'est les autres,*" he famously said. "Hell is other people." (And he knew nothing of Covid.)

Who hasn't dreamt of a Promised Land, a finer way of life in a more hospitable place, a 'land flowing with milk and honey'; a loftier level of happiness and freedom than the one we inhabit right now? When we picture that place, it's almost always 'higher', a 'heaven' we must ascend to, a stairway we must climb.

But what if, instead, we must first 'descend' in order to get there, down to the dark seabed – there's nothing lower than the seabed! – to sink our feet in its miry clay, to be lowered in the eyes of the world? What if the royal road to the Promised Land takes *that* path? What would we do then?

Then, like Israel frozen with fear on the seashore, we'd have to 'go forward' anyway, to entrust ourselves to the unseen salvation of God. "*See the deliverance the Lord will accomplish for you today,*" says Moses. But all they can see is the uncrossable water in front of them, and Pharaoh's galloping chariots closing in from behind them.

Can we trust a salvation we still can't see? Or is it back to slavery in Egypt, to the confining world we've always known?

To be human is to face this choice. Often. Sometimes we must do things that look as foolish and degrading in the eyes of the world as plunging blindly into deep and dark waters. We must lower ourselves, 'humble ourselves', trusting only in God's goodness. Remember that stirring verse from the old hymn, "How Firm a Foundation"?

*"When through the deep waters I call thee to go,
The rivers of woe shall not thee overflow;
For I will be with thee, thy troubles to bless,
And sanctify to thee thy deepest distress."*

"Tell the people to go forward," says God. "That way lies the Promised Land. And you, Moses, lift up your staff, stretch out your hand, and divide the sea." Moses does it – or does God do it? Either way, Moses has been enlisted into the work of his own salvation. So has Israel: "They went into the sea on dry ground, the waters forming a wall on their right and on their left."

Oppressed people have always responded to this story. The revolution begun by God at Israel's exodus continues in them. It's the long march to the Promised Land. Jews, to this day, re-tell this lesson year after year, when they remember the exodus in their Passover worship. "This is on account of what the Lord did for *me,*" they pray, "when *I* went forth from Egypt" – as though the revolution continues even now, in them.

And for us? God invites us to take our part in our own liberation too, our exodus to freedom, wrought for us by Jesus Christ. The invitation is universal and unbounded. It's personal and public, private and political. It's as near as our next breath and as wide as the cosmos.

For God has done everything necessary for our liberation. He even enlists us to do *our* part, so it may finally have effect in our lives. We must only descend into those waters to enroll in the freedom for which we were made.

Prayers of Intercession

Almighty God, by your power you led you people out of slavery in Egypt, and raised Jesus Christ from death to life. Deliver all who call upon you today into freedom and abundant life.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the whole Church of Jesus Christ, across the land and around the world. Your love and purpose never change; sustain your Church in the confusions of a changing world. By your Holy Spirit, give us good judgment to walk in your way, discerning minds to love your truth, and hearts willing to yield our lives to your life.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord, guard us in our speaking and listening. Shield us from hasty words, mean accusations, and disregard for truth spoken in love, in our families, with our friends, and in all our relationships.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace in places of violence, for peace in our own land, and in our own hearts. Let your justice make demands upon us. Renew communities everywhere, and heal our relations with each other, with the earth, and with you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

God of all grace and comfort, hear our prayer for those who are unhappy, who are lonely or neglected, damaged or abused, or whose life is darkened by pain and sorrow. Hear the prayers of those who cry to you in the darkest hours of the night, and shine the light of your presence on those who live in the shadow of death.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Creator and Lord of all, we praise you for the knowledge of nature revealed by the careful work of scientists. Bless and prosper their efforts, and grant that we may use their discoveries for the welfare of all, for the healing of the earth, and for the glory of your name.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We give thanks for those who have died in the faith, those remembered especially by us, and those remembered by no one but you. Grant that we may come to share with them the joy and peace of life everlasting...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, source of deliverance and help, do not let our hearts be troubled, but fill us with such confidence and joy that we may sleep in your peace and rise in your light.

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**