

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

The 1st Sunday after Epiphany
(The Baptism of the Lord)
10 January 2021

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 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 forth in our lives the truth of his love. Glory be to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

O 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 back on you and on each other? We confess our selfishness. Do we nurse ancient wounds and hold on to petty grudges? We are hostage to our own destructive habits. 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.

God of salvation, at the River Jordan you bathed Jesus in glory, your Spirit descended upon him, and you revealed him as your beloved Son. In spirit and in power, tear open the heavens and come down to us. Strengthen us to acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord, that we who are reborn in his likeness may walk with him in the path of obedience; 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 the 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, your voice is majestic and strong, blessing your people with peace. By your Spirit, help us to hear your voice today; 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 Mark 1: 4-11 (*John the Baptist baptises Jesus in the Jordan.*)

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, proclaiming a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. And people from the whole Judean countryside and all the people of Jerusalem were going out to him, and were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins.

Now John was clothed with camel's hair, with a leather belt around his waist, and he ate locusts and wild honey.

He proclaimed, 'The one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to stoop down and untie the thong of his sandals. I have baptized you with water; but he will baptize you with the Holy Spirit.'

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. 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 Mark 1:9 *Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptised by John in the Jordan.*

It troubled the first Christians that Jesus would come to John to be baptised. For John's was a "baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins." Why would Jesus want that? What sin could *he* have to confess?

Outer cleansing of the body, in baptism, symbolised an inner cleansing of the heart. But this inner cleansing was never meant to be private. A deep breath, a plunge beneath the waters, then rising up for gasp of air – this symbolic 'death and re-birth' prepared John's followers for the coming of a new society, one whose hope lay in the coming of God's Messiah.

St Mark tells us Jesus *is* this Messiah. But why would a Lord *of* forgiveness want a baptism *for* forgiveness? This troubled the first Christians. It troubled John the Baptist too. "I'm not worthy to stoop down and untie his sandals!" he said. But this is how love rescues us. Our 'worthiness' has little to do with it.

During the temperance movement, some 'took the pledge', not because *they* had a problem with alcohol but because they loved those who did. For love doesn't just *delight* in the ones it loves; love *suffers* with them and for them. Love 'stoops down' to be

with them. When cancer afflicts adolescents, and the treatments make their hair fall out, their classmates may shave their heads. "See?" they say, "You're not alone." This gesture of solidarity is not a cure for cancer, no. But it revitalises our hearts when others share in our trials and woes. And who knows? Maybe, in ways we'll never understand, it revitalises our bodies too.

Isn't this why Jesus waded into the Jordan River to stand shoulder to shoulder with sinful, suffering humans like us? He shares our trials and woe. He came to be one *with* us so that he could do something *for* us. "God made him to be sin who knew no sin, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God," said St Paul (2 Cor 5:21).

One of the early Church Fathers said, "Only that which is *assumed* can be healed." And by 'assumed', he means 'taken on', as when someone says, "*I will assume your debt. I'll take it on as my own.*" In the same way, by assuming our human condition, by taking it on as his own, Jesus heals it.

Imagine a lifeguard who never budged from the elevated deck chair on the beach, but shouted instructions to a drowning swimmer instead. "Hey, you in the red bathing suit! Yah, *you!* I can see you're drowning out there. Don't panic! Breathe. Keep your head up. Higher. No, *higher.* Now swim. *Harder.* I'll toss you a line when you get closer...oh, too late, now you've gone and drowned."

Too much religion is like that, don't you think? Just shouting instructions from on high. But real lifeguards are real lifesavers. And they save your life in the only way they can, by risking their own. They descend from their elevated throne and dive into the very waters you're drowning in, just as Jesus plunged into Jordan's murky waters. He immersed himself in the rising tide of human affairs. He went all the way down, right to the muddy bottom, to retrieve us.

For in order to restore our humanity to that image God had in mind for us all along, Jesus had to immerse himself in it. He had "to come down into the chaos of our human world," says Rowan Williams. "Jesus descend to our level, where things are shapeless and meaningless, in a state of vulnerability and unprotectedness."

But when he rises from those muddy waters, Jesus hears the divine accolade. It's a round of applause from heaven. "You are my Child, my Beloved: you please me." Here at last is our human nature restored. His symbolic death and re-birth in the Jordan must now be played out 'for real' in Jerusalem.

What does this mean for us? It means the new society God wants to create out of us will not always look successful and muscular. It won't often be in charge of things, issuing orders from on high. But it will be immersed in those conditions of chaos and trouble, "where humanity is more disordered, disfigured, and needy," as Rowan Williams also says.

He means not only the disordered, disfigured and needy world 'out there', but the world 'in here' too, the private and personal one. There's chaos and confusion in our own hearts too. They need restoration. They want washing too.

The Church is not a temperance movement. Our own baptism not an act of self-improvement, or a pious act of will like 'signing the pledge'. Our salvation was never something we could do on our own, was it? To be baptised 'in Christ' is to have something done to us, within us, and for us. It is to be joined to Jesus in *his* own dying and rising, to drown, as it were, in God's grace, and then to rise again with him, to breathe the fresh air of his Spirit.

There's a hymn about this (#184 in our hymn book). They're words we could sing quietly to ourselves or say aloud as a prayer when life overwhelms and hurts us, and we're drowning in chaos and confusion. The last verse goes like this:

*Come bow beneath the flowing wave.
Christ stands here at your side,
and raises you, as from the grave
God raised the crucified.
Water, River, Spirit, Grace,
sweep over me, sweep over me!
Re-carve the depths your fingers traced
in sculpting me.*

Prayers of Intercession

God of mystery and power, open our eyes to the fire of your love and open our ears to the thunder of your justice, that we may receive your gifts of blessing and peace, to the glory of your name.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church, beginning with ourselves in our own homes, and for all who long to gather once again in your sanctuary, but cannot. 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 you Church's work and service we may know the new life you offer 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 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 delight filling every corner of our hearts.

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**