

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

*The 1st Sunday in Lent
21 February 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: We do not live by bread alone,

P: but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Holy One, in love you made us from the dust of the earth and breathed your life into us. By your Spirit, call forth our prayers now, feed us with the bread of heaven, and lead us to life eternal, through the strong love of Jesus Christ, who suffered on the cross and was raised from the dead for us. Praise to you, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

Merciful One, you hate nothing you have made, and you alone can forgive our sin. When good seems evil to us, and evil good, show us the difference. Give us your strength to resist the seductions of foolish desire and temptation's vain allure. Create in us clean hearts Make us honest in our confession that we may be safe in your salvation.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

God of the Covenant, as the forty days of deluge swept away corruption, and watered new beginnings of righteousness and life, so, throughout these forty days of Lent, open within us the wellspring of your grace. Cleanse and renew us and cause your life to flourish within us; through Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, world without end. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "Nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord." 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, you have taught us that we do not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from your mouth. Make us hungry for your truth, and nourish us today; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 25: 1-10 (*A Prayer for Guidance and Deliverance*)

To you, O Lord, I lift up my soul.
 O my God, in you I trust;
 do not let me be put to shame;
 do not let my enemies exult over me.
 Do not let those who wait for you be put to shame;
 let them be ashamed who are wantonly treacherous.
 Make me to know your ways, O Lord;
 teach me your paths.
 Lead me in your truth, and teach me,
 for you are the God of my salvation;
 for you I wait all day long.
 Be mindful of your mercy, O Lord, and of your steadfast love,
 for they have been from of old.
 Do not remember the sins of my youth or my transgressions;
 according to your steadfast love remember me,
 for your goodness' sake, O Lord!
 Good and upright is the Lord;
 therefore he instructs sinners in the way.
 He leads the humble in what is right,
 and teaches the humble his way.
 All the paths of the Lord are steadfast love and faithfulness,
 for those who keep his covenant and his decrees.

(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

Genesis 9: 8-17 (*After the flood, God places his bow in the skies*)

God said to Noah and to his sons with him, 'As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that

is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.'

God said, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth.

'When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. When the bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.'

God said to Noah, 'This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.'

L: This is the Word of the Lord.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

Genesis 9:16 *"When I see the bow is in the clouds, I will remember my everlasting Covenant."*

Sunday School murals show a grinning, grandfatherly Noah perched on the prow of the Ark. It's crowded with monkeys, elephants, and giraffes, two of each. A yellow sun hangs in a cloudless sky beneath a bright rainbow.

These murals would censor the story's terror and violence, rather as bedtime versions of 'Red Riding Hood' omit the fact that the Big Bad Wolf *devours* the innocent girl. (Not the best moment to wish a child 'pleasant dreams' and turn off the light!)

"The Lord was sorry he made humans, and it grieved him to his heart." That's how the fable begins, back in chapter six. But God's regret has rage in it, as sorrow often does. It's the tearful anger that rises up within us when someone has deliberately, with malice aforethought, ruined something or someone we love dearly. We sense it in mobs braying for the death penalty, and in vindictive cheers when an enemy's cities are bombed into oblivion. It's in the fury we feel at vandalism, at litter left strewn in a favourite park, or graffiti defacing a building we love.

What we see in the fable of Noah is a growing apprehension of the very nature of God. It's an 'anthropomorphic' God, admittedly. And why not? How else could *we* see what's really at stake here?

It's as though two opposing aspects of God's character must battle for dominance. On the one hand, there's God's sorrow and anger over the wicked mess

that humans have made of things. These stem from the high value God places on righteousness, justice, and the good order of creation.

If God were to be true to *this* value, and this value alone, God *must* exact punishment, for the same reason Criminal Court Justices hand out punishments to those who violate the law. They do it, in part, to show us that the values we enshrine in law (if they're good laws) really do *matter*. If they didn't matter, we'd shrug off every offence, and murder would be treated like jaywalking.

God's justice can't shrug this off. "I'm sorry I made these humans. I'll blot them out from the face of the earth." A torrential tsunami floods the earth, returning it to the watery formlessness it had *before* the Spirit of God ever "moved upon the face of the waters." Some see, here, a little parable of the deadly backlash in store for us because of our vicious mistreatment of Nature. They're not wrong, are they?

But God has another voice, another aspect. What else can we call it but 'Mercy'? Mercy won't wield the weapons of anger. It usurps them with the 'second chance', and third, that forgiveness alone makes possible.

"Noah found favour in the sight of the Lord." Mercy awakens when God *sees* Noah. This is a strange moment. Why *Noah*? "Noah walked with God," we're told. This fragment of the old order, Noah, catches God's eye. It awakens Mercy, asleep in God's heart. Mercy devises a peace plan to counter the blitzkrieg of Justice.

Noah, his family, and the animals enter the Ark to ride out the coming chaos. They're a fragment of the old order; the vessel is a small life-bearing seed. God's Mercy can work with that. Meanwhile, God's Justice 'vents' with anger, and all hell breaks loose for forty days and nights.

The waters begin to recede at the moment "God remembers Noah, and all the animals with him in the ark." Open-eyed Mercy remembers what Justice would forget.

In the clear calm after the raging storm, God resolves that Mercy must now, forever after, *constrain* the anger of Justice. God's loving Mercy will never again let God's Justice-loving love become a 'blessed rage for order.'

Waves of violent vengeance are never God's final answer. Peace and Mercy are, and always will be, eventually. Between a 'flawed' creation and the nothing of chaos, God chooses to stand by the world-as-it-is and find a way to love it.

God makes a Covenant, the first of several in the Bible. But this one has the widest reach. "This is the everlasting Covenant I make with you, and every living creature, and future generations," says God.

Covenants are promises, and God's everlasting promise is this: "Never again will there be a flood to destroy the earth." God's Mercy, by tempering the fury of God's Justice, will forever nurture Creation's beauty, truth, and goodness.

The sign of this Covenant is the rainbow. The sign is not meant for us, mind you. Like a string tied round the finger, it's a reminder for *God*. "When the bow is in the clouds," says God, "I will see it and remember the Covenant." The rainbow is God's

sword beaten into a ploughshare. It's a sign of God's commitment to peace on earth and the *goodness* that's possible in creation.

God's Justice, even God's fury, is no less real because of this. God never constrains Justice itself, just his infinite capacity to destroy forever, utterly, in anger.

This story conveys a sprig of hope, the way the dove carried the sprig of plant to Noah. Christians would say this hope is finally fulfilled in Jesus Christ, who (we do our best to believe) is the way God has found to love us.

He's the perfect embodiment of God's merciful, suffering love. *But he's perfectly just too.* Jesus is like us in every way, yes, but without the malice and evil intent we carry in our hearts; and who, rather than condemning us from afar as Justice on its own would do, came instead in Mercy to dwell with us here, 'east of Eden'.

Why? To take into his own self the brutality and grief of life, and to bear the hellish kind of evil only humans can do to each other, by dying on the cross like a rejected, broken, criminal; and then rising to re-make the world, *opening* all creation to the promise of God's peaceable kingdom – beautiful, good, and true.

Prayers of Intercession

Loving God, in this season of repentance and healing make us mindful of the needs of the Church, the world, and all those in need.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Lord Jesus Christ, give to your whole Church such strength and conviction that we may share your readiness to forgive, your willingness to suffer and love, and power to heal, that your will may more and more be done, until the whole earth sings Alleluia to you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for peace, remembering before you those places where there is war, and any sort of human conflict. We pray for the victims of famine, for refugees and prisoners of war.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the health of all creation, your first great gift. Forgive the harm we do to it, killing its beauty, polluting the air, spoiling the seas, and hounding species into extinction. Teach us to care, not only for animals, birds, and all green and growing things, but also for the soil, air, and water by which all things live.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those afflicted by the Covid virus, for those all afflicted by any kind of illness, especially those whose lives are drawing to a close, who wish only for the comfort and peace that are eternal.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Gracious God, you love us with a deep and abiding love and you call us each by name. We commend to your mercy those who suffer from illness beyond the reach of human skill. Give them faith to trust you fully, though your way is hidden, until they come to behold the glory of your presence, and they know you even as they are known by you.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Remembering those we have loved, who have died and joined that cloud of witnesses who have come fully alive in your holy presence, we keep a time of silence to pray for those matters that concern us most...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*...

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy Lord, your love overwhelms us, going to the cross for us, enduring the grave for us, and leading us to the joy of new life. Keep our whole being, spirit, soul and body, alive to your truth and bound to your will; through Jesus Christ our Lord.

As our Saviour has taught, so we pray:

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**