

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

*The 2nd Sunday after Epiphany
17 January 2021*

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

Opening Words

L: We praise you, for we are fearfully and wonderfully made.

P: Wonderful are your works; that we know very well.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

Loving God, the fountain of life, in your light we see light. In Jesus Christ you came to redeem us, and through your Holy Spirit you shower your gifts upon the Church. Draw us into a deeper union with you, keep us in the bond of peace, and bring all creation to worship before your throne; Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

God, eternal and merciful, we confess our sin: the sin we deny and the sin we know too well; the wrong we have done and the good we have left undone. Mend our lives; deliver us from proud thoughts and vain desires. Help us, with true humility, to draw near to you and confide in your grace, finding in you our refuge and strength.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, from our earliest days you call us by name. Make our ears attentive to your voice, and our spirits eager to respond, that having heard your summons in Jesus Christ, we may follow him, and be his glad disciples; through the same Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God forever. *Amen*

An Assurance of Pardon

L: "The mercy of God is from everlasting to everlasting." 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, prepare our hearts, to receive your Word. Silence in us any voice but your own, that, by hearing, we may come to understand your will and trust in your truth; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 139: 1-6, 13-18 (*The comfort of being seen and known by God*)

O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue,
 O Lord, you know it completely.
 You hem me in, behind and before,
 and lay your hand upon me.
 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
 it is so high that I cannot attain it.
 For it was you who formed my inward parts;
 you knit me together in my mother's womb.
 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
 Wonderful are your works;
 that I know very well.
 My frame was not hidden from you,
 when I was being made in secret,
 intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance.
 In your book were written
 all the days that were formed for me,
 when none of them as yet existed.
 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
 How vast is the sum of them!
 I try to count them—they are more than the sand;
 I come to the end—I am still with you.

(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 John 1: 43-51 (*Jesus call Philip and Nathanael*)

The next day Jesus decided to go to Galilee. He found Philip and said to him, 'Follow me.' Now Philip was from Bethsaida, the city of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, 'We have found him about whom Moses in the law and also the prophets wrote, Jesus son of Joseph from Nazareth.'

Nathanael said to him, 'Can anything good come out of Nazareth?'

Philip said to him, 'Come and see.'

When Jesus saw Nathanael coming towards him, he said of him, 'Here is truly an Israelite in whom there is no deceit!'

Nathanael asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?'

Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'

Nathanael replied, 'Rabbi, you are the Son of God! You are the King of Israel!'

Jesus answered, 'Do you believe because I told you that I saw you under the fig tree? You will see greater things than these.' And he said to him, 'Very truly, I tell you, you will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man.'

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St John 1:48 *"I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you."*

Jesus found Philip and called him. "Follow me," he said. Philip did follow him. Then Philip found Nathanael. "Come and see," he told him. Nathanael did 'come and see'. And as he came within earshot of Jesus, he saw Jesus staring right back at him. Then he heard Jesus say this about him: "See that fellow with Philip? His name's Nathanael. There's no deceit in *this* Israelite."

Every Israelite is a 'descendant of Jacob', whose name became 'Israel' after he'd wrestled all night with an angel at the barren place called Peniel, which means 'the face of God'. "You have striven with God," said the angel to Jacob. "You shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel." For the name 'Israel' means something like 'God-striver' or 'God-wrestler'.

So, although he'd yet to meet him, Jesus had already seen and known Nathanael. "I can see he's a God-wrestler, one of those *genuine* 'Israelites'. He's striving to find life's true path. He's no deceiver, but neither will he *be* deceived. He should follow me."

It's unnerving to be noticed without our noticing it, as Nathanael was. We go about the world wanting to find things out, not to *be* found out. We want to see for ourselves, not to *be* seen on other people's screens, secretly.

But doesn't this way of knowing become a competition with the world? Doesn't it pitch us against each other in games of one upmanship? We strive to know the truth of things by dominating and dissecting them, the way scientists in white lab coats poke inert matter to make it show what it's made of, and prod frightened animals to make them yield fresh data.

This could be done without cruelty, perhaps. But when it's pushed, the pursuit of knowledge – *especially in the modern world* – is all about forcing things to submit and answer *our* questions; it's never about opening ourselves to *be* questioned.

We too rarely appreciate the knowledge we discover in 'dialogue' and loving conversation, from talk made truthful because it also makes us vulnerable. Instead, it's a one-way interrogation under a blinding light. "I'll ask the questions here!" says the callous detective to the frightened suspect. "Your call may be monitored for quality assurance purposes," says the recorded voice we're not allowed to talk back to.

We do this to each other with hidden surveillance cameras, sophisticated methods of monitoring the world around us, and with a 'cold, clinical stare' at people, that 'Eye of Sauron' at the centre of our medical system. Google, Amazon, and Facebook have a detailed profile on each of us, based on our Internet searches, our On-line purchases, the things we've 'liked' with a 'click', as well as our age, income, marital status, and ethnicity.

There's a reason we call them 'faceless' corporations. They make it deliberately difficult for us to know anything about them, yet they know all about us.

But *do* they know us, truly?

"We've never met. How did you get to know me?" asked Nathanael.

"I saw you under the fig tree, long before Philip told you 'to come and see' me," said Jesus.

I have to wonder if, in that moment, Nathanael didn't hear in his 'Israelite' memory a faint echo of Psalm 139:

*O Lord, you have searched me and known me.
You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
you discern my thoughts from afar.*

But Jesus never had Nathanael under 'surveillance', hacking his data remotely. Nor was Jesus recruiting a particular set of transferable skills for his sales team.

What then? From far away Jesus had seen deep within Nathanael. He saw that Nathanael was indeed true 'Israelite', a 'God-wrestler'. And seeing this, he saw deeper into the core of Nathanael than Nathanael could ever have seen into himself. *Ever*. This knowledge wasn't the product of a 'cold, clinical stare'. It was the fruit of love – *divine* love.

“Such knowledge is too wonderful, so high I cannot attain it,” says Psalm 139. For what we cannot attain on our own we can only receive as a gift.

This, and this alone, is why Nathanael blurted out his sudden confession of faith: “You’re the Son of God! You’re the King of Israel!” Nathanael’s confession isn’t a hesitant conclusion drawn from his *own* striving for self-knowledge; it’s the direct result of his discovery that God has seen and known and loved him all along. For God’s holy gaze is already upon us through the human eyes of Jesus.

This calls to mind another occasion when someone says ‘come and see’ in St John’s Gospel. It happens after the long conversation Jesus had with a Samaritan Woman at (of course) ‘*Jacob’s Well*’. Having never met her before, Jesus nonetheless *knows* her, deeply. She returns to her village and shouts, “Come and see a man who told me everything I’ve ever done! He can’t be the Messiah...*can* he?”

At the well, he’d promised her the gift ‘living water’, the elixir of ‘eternal life’, meaning *real* life; a life that’s true and meaningful, rich in spirit and inexhaustible.

In the same way, as he beheld Nathanael in his steady, loving, truthful gaze, Jesus promised him the very vision given to Jacob at Bethel: “You will see heaven opened and the angels of God ascending and descending upon the Son of Man,” he said.

Jacob called Bethel ‘the very Gate of Heaven’. But that Gate is not a place on a map. The Gate of Heaven lies deep within each one of us. It’s the truest part of our true selves. It’s the hidden, dormant self we blindly strive to be, but cannot. It’s the self we want to know, but do not.

But God does. The cold, clinical stare of Eye of Sauron will never see who we *really* are. Only Divine Love sees that, gazing through the human eyes of Jesus.

Prayers of Intercession

God of grace, we turn to you with thankful hearts, grateful for your care over all creation and your blessing of lives in all their variety. We commit ourselves once more into your care and keeping.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the whole Church of Christ, for the prospering of its life, and the deepening of its faith. Deepen our communion with one another in Christ, and grant that through the gifts your Spirit bestows upon us we may increase in faith, trust in your truth, and hope for the world to come.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for our own nation, and for those who work in government in this city and province, and for the high court of parliament, that they may govern with wisdom and justice, and for the common good.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who have come to despair of life turned against themselves; for those who feel unloved or abused, and those who cannot believe their life is a good gift from a good God. O Lord, pour down your mercy, your gentle healing and peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for all who are overworked or depressed, for all who feel destitute and have no one to turn to, and for all who feel tired and fed up with their isolation and exile from daily life. Loving Lord, protect and heal all who turn to you, and fill them with hope.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who have no home at all, remembering especially today the growing number of victims of poverty and loss, and all whose lives have been harmed by disaster, tragedy, and the Covid pandemic.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy One, awaken us with your voice, call by name, and enlighten our lives with your grace, that we may give ourselves to you. With hope for the world to come, we give thanks for those who have died, especially those whom we have known and loved, whom we name before you in our hearts...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*...

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Lord, you made us for yourself and we are restless without you. Abide with us in times of joy and be near when hardship comes. Help us to know and trust you in this life, and in the life to come, still to be with you; through Jesus Christ our Saviour, to whom, with you and the Holy Spirit, be glory and praise, world without end.

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**