

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

The Sunday before Epiphany
3 January 2021

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

Opening Words

L: Arise, shine, for your light has come,

P: and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

L: Let us worship God.

Prayers of Adoration and Confession

God of all creation, and Lord of all nations, the radiance of your Word shines in the Christ child, piercing the night that covers the earth, announcing the dawn of peace. May that same brightness illumine our lives. Beckon all nations to walk in your light, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

God of glory, in Jesus you reveal your love for all people. Forgive us for hiding in shadows and turning away from you. Look upon us, not as we are, but as we are found in him, which is how we long to be. Shed your light on the path that leads us closer to you, where we may offer true worship and give ourselves to him, to find the true source of joy for our hearts and peace for the world.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

P: Christ, have mercy upon us.

L: Lord, have mercy upon us.

Holy One, by the leading of a star you showed your only Son to the peoples of the earth. Lead us, who know you now by faith, to your presence, where we may see your glory face to face; 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: "In Christ all the fullness of God was 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 God of wisdom, illumine our minds. God of light, shine into our hearts; through Jesus Christ our Lord. *Amen*

The Psalm for the Day

Psalm 72: 1-7, 10-14 (*A Prayer for the King*)

Give the king your justice, O God,
 and your righteousness to a king's son.
 May he judge your people with righteousness,
 and your poor with justice.
 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people,
 and the hills, in righteousness.
 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people,
 give deliverance to the needy,
 and crush the oppressor.
 May he live while the sun endures,
 and as long as the moon, throughout all generations.
 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass,
 like showers that water the earth.
 In his days may righteousness flourish
 and peace abound, until the moon is no more.
 May the kings of Tarshish and of the isles
 render him tribute,
 may the kings of Sheba and Seba
 bring gifts.
 May all kings fall down before him,
 all nations give him service.
 For he delivers the needy when they call,
 the poor and those who have no helper.
 He has pity on the weak and the needy,
 and saves the lives of the needy.
 From oppression and violence he redeems their life;
 and precious is their blood in his sight.

(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 Matthew 2: 1-12 (*Wise men follow a star, find the infant Jesus, and worship him.*)

In the time of King Herod, after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea, wise men from the East came to Jerusalem, asking, 'Where is the child who has been born king of the Jews? For we observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.'

When King Herod heard this, he was frightened, and all Jerusalem with him; and calling together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born.

They told him, 'In Bethlehem of Judea; for so it has been written by the prophet: "And you, Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who is to shepherd my people Israel."'

Then Herod secretly called for the wise men and learned from them the exact time when the star had appeared. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, 'Go and search diligently for the child; and when you have found him, bring me word so that I may also go and pay him homage.'

When they had heard the king, they set out; and there, ahead of them, went the star that they had seen at its rising, until it stopped over the place where the child was. When they saw that the star had stopped, they were overwhelmed with joy.

On entering the house, they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage. Then, opening their treasure-chests, they offered him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh.

And having been warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they left for their own country by another road.

L: This is the Gospel of our Risen Christ.

P: Praise to you, Lord Jesus Christ.

Some thoughts on the Reading

St Matthew 2:10 *"When they saw the star...they were overwhelmed with great joy."*

These 'wise men' knew nothing of Israel's covenant with God. But their own kind of learning linked the movement of stars in the heavens with the movement of humans on earth. "Your Daily Horoscope" on the back page of the newspaper is a faded memory of their 'wisdom'. It feeds an intuition we can't quite shake off, despite the scolding of those humourless rationalists who've fashioned themselves into the high priests of our age. We can't shake off the haunting feeling that heaven and earth are in cahoots, and they involve us too.

Was it a new star, a comet, or a conjunction of planets? A rare conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter happened in our night sky just before Christmas. It made a brief, bright light. Remember 'The Age of Aquarius', "when the Moon is the Seventh House, and Jupiter aligns with Mars"? Not only would "peace guide the planets and love steer the stars", but on earth there would be "harmony and understanding, sympathy and trust abounding, no more falsehoods and divisions, golden living dreams of visions, mystic crystal revelation, and the mind's true liberation..." Now there's a trip to go on!

The word 'planet' means 'wandering star'. The trip taken by these wandering wise men put them into alignment with the Christ Child, the way "Jupiter aligns with Mars." For they'd seen something wonderful, first in the night sky, then in Bethlehem. But these two visions made one grand Epiphany. And the joy it gave them was strong. "They rejoiced exceedingly with great joy," says St Matthew.

Epiphanies do that. "In everyone's life there are moments when there is a lifting of the veil, opening a sight of the eternal," said the great Rabbi Abraham Heschel. He said more. "To some they are like shooting stars, passing and unremembered. In others they kindle a light that is never quenched."

This is true. Moments of clarity fade the ways the stars vanish in daylight. But their *effects* need not be quenched, not if they've lit a light within us. "The remembrance of that experience and our loyalty to the response of that moment are forces that sustain our faith," says Heschel. He's right.

These 'pagan' wise men were loyal to their experience. Seeing the momentous reality of God alive in the Christ Child, they knelt down, worshipped, and offered gifts. Let the gifts stand for what is truest and best about them. For that is what the Christ Child asks of us – an exchange of gifts. We offer ourselves to him because we receive God's grace and truth from him, the "joy of heaven to earth come down."

Do you remember that sentimental story by O. Henry, *Gifts of the Magi*? Jim and Della are a young couple, impoverished but very much in love. Each wants to give the other something beautiful at Christmas.

Della has her eye on a platinum fob and chain, "simple and chaste in design, properly proclaiming its value by substance alone and not by meretricious ornamentation." It would perfectly adorn Jim's pride and joy, the gold pocket watch that had been his father's and grandfather's. "As soon as she saw it, she knew that it must be Jim's."

But to buy this extravagant gift she must sacrifice her own pride and joy, her beautiful hair, "rippling and shining like a cascade of brown waters." She visits 'Mme Sofronie, Hair Goods of All Kinds', who shears her head of its hair in exchange for \$20. Della uses this money to purchase the fob and chain. She hurries home, elated and frightened. "Please God, make him think I am still pretty," she prays.

When Jim comes home for supper, she confesses everything. "I couldn't have lived through Christmas without giving you a present. It'll grow again – you won't

mind, will you? Maybe the hairs on my head were numbered...but nobody could ever count my love for you."

Jim embraces her, then takes a package from his overcoat pocket. Della unwraps this gift. It's a set of combs she'd "worshipped for long in a Broadway window, pure tortoise shell, with jewelled rims...but the tresses that should have adorned the coveted adornments were gone."

But all is not lost. She brings out her gift and offers it to him. "The dull, precious metal seemed to flash with a reflection of her bright and ardent spirit." But Jim had sold his watch to get the money to buy her combs.

On one level, their exchange of gifts is a comic failure. He no longer has a watch for the brand-new watch chain and fob she gave him. She no longer has long tresses of hair to wear those precious combs he gave her. But Henry finishes his story by saying this: "of all who give gifts these two were the wisest."

Why? Because each takes pride and joy in the other's pride and joy, they achieved the *real* goal of gift-giving: "Can you see by this little token, wrapped in bright paper, that I love you? That you delight me? That I would gladly sacrifice my pride and joy for you?" But these are God's Words to us, "wrapped in swaddling clothes, lying in a manger."

Such wondrous love as this must be exchanged if it's ever to be real. It must be given, and it must be received, and it must be mutual. Whenever this happens, it's an Epiphany of life's true meaning and goodness. It makes for moments of exceedingly great joy; a joy that shines like a bright star casting its light in the darkness.

In every Epiphany, in every moment of true encounter, there's an exchange of gifts. Something is given and something is received. This can only happen because there's a conjunction, a 'coming-together' of things which would otherwise be far, far apart. Not just 'Jupiter and Mars', but Jew and Gentile, friend and stranger, heaven and earth, God and us.

Prayers of Intercession

God of majesty, you hold the whole world in your hands. You created all people in your image, and dwell among us in Jesus Christ. Hear the cries of those who pray to you and strengthen your will within us.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

O Christ, the Ruler of rulers, guide the leaders of the nations to do what is right for the welfare of all creation, and to seek your peace and justice in all things.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for the Church of Jesus Christ. As wise men were led to worship the infant Jesus, so lead your Church, as gathered and scattered as we are, to know you

more clearly and to do your work more faithfully. Make your Church a sanctuary of your peace, and a place of welcome for people of every race and language.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those places where there is crisis and trouble. We remember those who perished in violence this week. Have mercy for all who mourn on this day. Hear the cries of those who suffer loss daily, and bring your healing and peace.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We pray for those who are gravely ill, and know they must soon die. Loving God, whose Son Jesus Christ brought healing to the sick and hope to the despairing; we pray for all who suffer from illness for which there is no cure. Surround them with love and care. Let them experience the fellowship of Christ, who bore pain and suffering for us, and at last won victory over death.

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

We remember those who have died. By the light shining in the child of Bethlehem, dispel the darkness that shrouds our path, that we, like them, may come to kneel before him in true worship, offer him our very selves, and turn to live in his way...*(keep a time of silence in God's presence)*....

L: Lord in your mercy

P: Hear our prayer

Holy one, you gather the whole universe into the light of your presence, and you show Jesus Christ to be your Son and our brother. Bring his healing to all our wounds, make whole all that is broken within us, speak his truth to our every falsehood, and shed his light in our every darkness, that all creation may see your glory and worship you, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, one God forever.

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**