

Worship at home
January 24, 2021



http://www.heraldmag.org/2008/08nd_15.htm

Call to worship:

Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

Candle is lit.

For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;
but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.¹

Prayers of adoration, confession and assurance:

Lord Jesus Christ, you have called us together as your people.

You have called us your friends and invited us to follow you.

And so, your church has grown from scattered homes in ancient times—to a worldwide community, embracing men and women, old and young, from many nations and cultures.

In our worship today, inspire us to wonder at the miracle of your church.

Help us see the privilege we share

to be part of your people across the ages and across the continents.

It is your love that keeps drawing us to you and to each other,
and so, we offer our wonder and praise with millions of people
who also gather in your name this day.

¹ Isaiah 60:1, 2

God of all the ages,
we gather in worship week by week, hoping to encounter your presence.
But we confess it's not easy to hear your voice.
Sometimes we get distracted by what's happening around us.
Sometimes we get confused by conflicting views of what you expect from us.
Sometimes we feel challenged and resist a new word from you.
We confess it is hard to turn our lives around
when we think we already know where we're going.
Lord, have mercy upon us.

Friends in Christ, believe in the good news. God's steadfast love endures forever.
Trust that God's forgiveness is for you.
Be at peace with God, with yourself and with each other,
in the name of Christ our Lord.²

Hymn: #678 "I greet thee, who my sure Redeemer art"
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-14q2ufiiHo>

Word of God read and interpreted:

² From worship resource for January 24, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>

Belief: The strategic plan of the Kingdom

At the beginning of his gospel, Mark proclaimed that the kingdom of God has come near with the advent of Jesus of Nazareth. Then, in chapters 1-3 he recorded various healings and exorcisms by which Jesus demonstrated the effects of the forgiveness of sin that is the central policy of the kingdom and the belovedness of the kingdom's citizens. In chapter 4 he recorded Jesus' first long speech in which he taught the strategic plan for the kingdom of God.

The setting was the sea of Galilee. The people crowded along the shore while Jesus climbed into a boat from which he taught.

READ MARK 4:1-34.

Contrary to the oft-assumed reason that they are easy to understand, parables are often not. Even if they are understood, they are not always readily applied. They are like suitcases: easy to carry with you but require effort to unpack and put-on all the contained meaning.

And Jesus admitted to this in verse 12: "for those outside, everything comes in parables; in order that 'they may indeed look, but not perceive, and may indeed listen, but not understand; so that they may not turn again and be forgiven.'"

This seems to me a strange rationale for his chosen style of preaching!

However, using the analogy of the lamp and the bushel basket, he then explained that his plan was not to keep the mysteries of the kingdom hidden from the public, nor to create a spiritual hierarchy. Rather, the implications of the government of God are hidden in the way a seed is hidden in the soil. The outward yield depends on the inner processes.

When Jesus was born in that stable and the heavenly army heralded his arrival to the shepherds, the God of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and of creation itself catalyzed his government into existence over and against the existing governments of kings and emperors.

The task of the Christian life is therefore not to build the kingdom in our time. If we think we can we're as arrogant as Adam and Eve pursuing ultimate knowledge and immortality! After all, "The earth produces of itself, first the stalk, then the head, then the full grain in the head." Rather, the task of the Christian life is to disclose that which is already here; to bring to light the Word of the Kingdom of God.

Just as grain is harvested only after the seed has been planted and tended; or, just as a bird can only nest in the shade of a mustard shrub only after the tiny seed has been planted, this task must begin in the soil of the soul; in the privacy of our hearts and minds.

Our outward behaviour – be it speech, body language, habits, or actions – depends symbiotically on our inner landscape of thoughts, emotional responses, and beliefs.

For example. If you believe the scientific process to be worthwhile and if you trust the people who make policies in response – whether related to safe driving habits or vaccinations – you're more likely to behave in accordance with those policies. If, however, you believe politicians are trying to control our lives for their own gain, you're not likely to obey the posted signs. And, if you believe the science that led to the invention of winter tires is a scam, you're not likely to buy those winter tires!

What we do and say depends on how we think and what we believe.

This is, in part, why it can be so hard to change habitual behaviours. You also have to acknowledge, want to change, and then change your core beliefs, values, and patterns of thought.

So, making visible the forgiveness of sin and belovedness that mark the policies and citizenship of the kingdom of God depends in no small part on our conviction that sin is forgiven, that people are beloved, and that Jesus of Nazareth is the Son of God by whom this state has become reality.

The struggle is that we live somewhere between the Garden of Eden and the renewed heaven and earth. The kingdom of God is near, yet so are the rocks and the weeds and the thorns and the heat and the storms.

We might wake with kingdom zeal and by 9:00 we're already entangled in the activities of the day and withered by fatigue. Forgiveness of sin no longer seems all that central to our day's activities. The kingdom of God is pushed aside by more immediately tangible concerns. We become like those who see but don't perceive and listen but don't understand; who fail to turn and live into the implications of the kingdom's policies.

When I was working in forestry, my boss's truck was equipped with a GPS. Whenever we'd cross a field to get to the forest, the polite voice would tirelessly recalibrate our course and urge us to return to the road.

Repentance is the act of changing one's mind or purpose and returning to that which you've left.

It's no accident that Jesus' first recorded words in Mark 1:15 urge repentance be a regular part of a disciple's mindset. After his baptism his first proclamation was: "The kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe the good news."

When we are being choked by the cares of the day, or entangled in consumeristic thirst for pleasure and possessions, or withered by the heat of fear and anxiety, or pressured to shelve our gospel convictions because they are impeding the progress of Caesar's kingdoms, it behooves us to recognize what is driving our thoughts and actions in that moment, and return in the privacy of our heart and mind to the policy of the kingdom of God. With God's help our subsequent actions can be taken with patience, kindness, compassion, gentleness, and can thus bring to light the grace of Jesus Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God. Because,

With the birth of Jesus, God has reclaimed his creation.

By Jesus sin is forgiven.

In Jesus we are beloved by the heavenly Father.

Amen.

Glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit now and forever.

Amen.

Hymn #685 "How firm a foundation"

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vXcgQL0SQ40&t=38s>

(First-Plymouth Church, Lincoln, Nebraska)

Prayers of thanksgiving and intercession

Holy and loving God,
we thank you for the story of Christ's life among us,
for your government catalyzed by his advent,
for his example of prayer and work,
a pattern for the way we live.

We give you thanks for moments of quiet and contemplation that restore us,
and help us perceive your Spirit at work in the world and in our own lives.

Teach us to trust in your strength,
so that we can live with confidence and courage
even in the midst of stress and anxiety.
Center us in the belief
that despite outward struggles and trials,
through your grace sin is forgiven and we are beloved.

Meet us in that place of deep stillness within us all.

In the quiet of this moment we hand over to you
all those things stirring within us today:

Anything that has been distracting or hurtful...
(Hold a silence)

Anything that makes us worry or brings sleepless nights...
(Hold a silence)

Our hopes and dreams for the future...
(Hold a silence)

and for the lives of those we love...
(Hold a silence)

We hold before you the needs and hopes of those we know who need your presence,
especially remembering those facing grief and loss...
(Hold a silence)

We pray for wisdom for the leaders of our world...
(Hold a silence)

We pray that peace and prosperity will begin to flourish in places facing war, famine, and disaster...

(Hold a silence)

We pray for the work of Presbyterian World Service & Development serving in these situations...

(Hold a silence)

We pray that those who manage the world economy find honest, just and generous ways to respond to the challenges caused by the pandemic...

(Hold a silence)

We pray that the dignity of each creature be honoured and the earth itself be treasured...

(Hold a silence)³

Amen.

Benediction:

May the Lord bless you and keep you,
the Lord be kind and gracious to you,
the Lord look upon you with favour,
and grant you peace.

Amen.

³ Adapted from worship resource for February 7, 2021 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship>