**Worship-at-home**

January 16, 2022

*Second Sunday after the Epiphany*

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The Throne of Grace



**Call to worship:**  Psalm 124:8

**Hymn:** #364 “Approach, my soul, the mercy seat”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NVHIIeeLNJI>

(Christ Church Orthodox Presbyterian Church – Flower Mound, Texas)

**Prayers of Praise, Confession, and Supplication:[[1]](#footnote-1)**

Father of light and life,

as the new year unfolds before us,

we begin to feel the sunlight coming back to brighten the winter.

Lord Jesus,

who art the Messiah and the unique Son of God,

you shine your light into our lives.

Our spirits grow stronger in that light.

Holy Spirit,

you strengthen us to face whatever this year will hold.

And so, we come to praise you –

Father, Son, and Holy Spirit,

Holy Trinity,

ever Three, yet ever One –

for your light which transforms our days and our lives,

and for your wisdom which enlightens truth for our times.

Shine through us, we pray,

so that we may bear the light of Jesus in this world you love.

God of all life and our lives,

we gather in worship week by week,

seeking your refreshing presence.

But we confess sometimes we are discouraged.

We give in to the temptation to despair.

We don’t expect your presence to make a difference for us.

Forgive us when we give up on you.

By your grace, refresh us when we are weary or worried,

and renew our trust in you.

**Assurance of Pardon:**

Do not be afraid, for Christ has redeemed you.  
Baptized in the deep waters of death, he has washed away your sins.  
Risen from death, he invites you to be washed in the cleansing tide of God’s mercy.

Ascending to the throne of heaven, he lives to intercede,

to offer merciful forgiveness when we succumb to sin,

and graceful help when we need strength.  
In Jesus Christ your sins are forgiven;

accept his pardon,

be at peace with God, with yourself, and with each other.

And give thanks to the Lord,

for He is good;

his love endures forever.

**Hymn:** #647 Lead us, heavenly Father, lead us”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vfXUEx0CsYA>

(Choir of St. Michael and all angels, Bassett)

**The Word of God:**

The Throne of Grace

During the season of Epiphany, we’re reading through the various episodes of Jesus’ life which Luke has recorded in the first 9 chapters of his gospel and asking:

What does the life of Jesus mean for me?

Last week we read of his baptism and reflected on the sacrament as the sign of God’s *adoptive* grace. In our baptism, we are united with Christ in his, and made sons and daughters of God, siblings of Christ, beloved by the Father.

Following his baptism, Jesus was led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit where he fasted for 40 days and was tempted by the devil. This is the episode we’ll consider today.

Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

READ LUKE 4:1-13.

Our second reading is from the sermon to the Hebrews in which the preacher commented on the significance of Jesus’ times of testing for those who follow him.

Listen now for the Word of the Lord.

READ HEBREWS 2:10-11, 14-18; 4:14-16.

This is the Word of the Lord.

**Thanks be to God.**

What does Jesus’ time of testing mean for us today?

Often the account of Jesus’ time in the wilderness with the devil is read at the beginning of the season of Lent as a way of framing the 40-day season of fasting and penitence. In that context, the message is often some version of “Go and do likewise.” And so, for 40 days we try and create our own wilderness. We spend the season fasting and embracing spiritual disciplines so that we will be better able to stand against the devil and have a heightened perception of the Holy Spirit within.

Now, I don’t want to discredit such tradition full-stop. However, while it may be a noble goal, it is in some sense a set-up for failure and a heightened perception of guilt.

Firstly, to create our own wilderness, and our own temptations runs the risk of falling into the devil’s trap of trying to prove the existence and imminence of God. It can become a lesser version of throwing one’s self off of the pinnacle to prove that God will save us!

Secondly, Jesus didn’t create the wilderness. The wilderness exists, the devil exists, and Jesus was led by the Spirit into such wilderness.

And, most importantly, human beings cannot endure the testing of the wilderness nor the challenges of the devil.

We’ve seen this before.

When God delivered Israel from their slavery in Egypt, they spent 40 years in the wilderness learning how to be the sons and daughters of God and then choosing whether or not to live into that identity. They were given leaders by God, visible signs of his grace in the manna and water, a pillar of fire at night and a pillar of smoke to lead them by day, and explicit instructions as to what children of God ought to do and not do. And yet, with all of those tangible aids, we learn as the story unfolds that Israel did not succeed. They failed to embrace and live into their God-given identity as the children of the Most High. They demanded that God prove himself. And, they worshiped other beings.

In contrast, here we see Jesus succeeding where Israel did not.

Each of his responses to the devil are excerpts from Moses’ sermons to the Israelites as he encouraged them to hold fast to their confession of faith and live in reliance on and obedience to the Lord God. The full text of which is in Deuteronomy 6 and 8.

Where Israel failed, Jesus succeeded.

The devil tucked his tail and slunk off to plan his next attempt.

I don’t think the story of Jesus’ trials in the wilderness is exclusively intended for us to create our own wildernesses and summon feats of faith by which we will move to a higher level of spirituality. Indeed, that may – if we’re not careful – just play into the devil’s hands as we then despair our lack of success!

I think it’s more helpful, at least for today, to consider why Jesus endured this wilderness time at all.

Jesus had just been baptized and we heard the divine voice affirming that he is the unique Son of God with whom the God we cannot see and who spoke all things into being, with whom the God for whom and through whom all things exist, is well pleased.

Then, Luke told us he was full of the Holy Spirit.

The 19th century preacher G. Campbell Morgan made an interesting comment about this detail. He observed that, far from being some sort of heightened spiritual state achieved through higher order contemplation and 40 day fasts (by the way, Jesus was full of the Holy Spirit *before* he entered the wilderness, yet *after* his baptism and the revelation of the divine voice), being full of the Holy Spirit is the natural, unblemished state of humanity.

We are created as images of God. We are created to live every hour in perfect, harmonious fellowship with our Creator.

To be full of the Holy Spirit is to be in harmonious union with our Creator and Lord; it is to be fully human as God created us to be.

However, we live in a context where this harmony has been disrupted. We are often blinded to the Spirit’s presence within us and are thus separated from our God, out of balance, and divided within ourselves. Because of our imperfect ability to recognize the Spirit within us and enjoy the fellowship with God wrought by Jesus Christ, we live in the wilderness. A wilderness which our Creator is reclaiming, but a wilderness nonetheless.

The human context is one of joy and also despair; of peace and also chaos; of health and also illness. It is creation redeemed and creation yet-to-be-redeemed. It is wilderness with glimpses of the Garden.

Here we have Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, perfect God yet perfect Human, being led by the Spirit into the imperfect realm of humanity. The realm of hunger, greed, lust, pride, envy, division, disorder, discontent.

Full of the Holy Spirit, he was led by the Spirit into our daily reality.

What does it mean for us that Jesus entered the wilderness?

Jesus has come as the perfect child of God. The perfect Israel. The perfect human to engage our imperfect reality.

He has come into our wilderness and done for us, in our place, and on our behalf what we cannot do ourselves.

He faced the devil in ways we cannot: beginning in the wilderness and ending on the cross of Calvary.

He went to that cross in our place and on our behalf to fight the battle against sin, death, and the devil for us and for God’s glory.

And *he* won.

The devil’s power over us is undermined.

The power of death – which is fear – is vanquished in his resurrection.

The earth and all that is therein is reclaimed for God. The devil was arrogant and ignorant when he claimed that the authority of all the kingdoms of the world has been given over to him. For a time that appears to be true, but the gospel is that his authority is meaningless. He’s like a skyscraper with no foundation. Life is reclaimed for God through the ministry of Jesus, and the devil’s reign is over.

Sin, which the devil likes to throw in our face to make us feel guilty and despair, is forgiven through Jesus’ long-term engagement with and ultimate victory over the devil.

Of course, all of this does not mean that we are free from trials and temptations. One day, when Christ returns and heaven and earth are wed, we will be. But in this age, the devil still tries to steer us away from our God-given identity and the grace and mercy of Jesus Christ.

Nor does this mean that we are sinless or that we will never cave under the pressures of the trials and tests.

We do and we will.

We are not Christ.

However, what it does mean, is that, in Christ we are forgiven people.

When we do succumb to despair and temptation, we have a great high priest who sits on the throne of grace and offers us words of mercy. Of kindness and forgiveness.

When we are in the midst of trials, we have a Saviour who “himself was tested by what he suffered, so he is able to help those who are being tested.”

So, what do we do?

We remember John the baptist’s words when he proclaimed a baptism of repentance into the forgiveness of sin.

There’s that beautiful word of grace our Lord speaks from the throne: Repentance.

Repentance is not just about sackcloth and ashes; it’s about returning to the One who alone can strengthen us to persevere.

Repentance is about boldly approaching the throne of grace from thence we receive the help we need from the One who has defeated the devil and ascended, in an ironic slap of the devil’s face, to rule the church and one day all the kingdoms of the world.

Because Jesus was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, we can come before throne of God and receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Amen.

**Hymn:** “Before the throne of God I stand”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4MUNywhsZPU>

(Selah)

**Prayers of Intercession and Thanksgiving:[[2]](#footnote-2)**

O God,

Jesus brought the joy

into lives that needed hope and a new beginning.

We pray for all those who need a new beginning this year:

Individuals trying to make a new start,

Families trying to sort through difficulties,

Groups hoping to accomplish good things for others,

Refugees building new homes in a new land,

Students and teachers beginning a new semester,

Businesses and congregations trying to rebuild in uncertain times.

*A brief silence is kept*

Show each one how much they matter to you,

and renew their courage and resolve to make a fresh start.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

O God,

Jesus changed water into wine

to show us that you can accomplish extraordinary things through ordinary lives.

We pray for all those volunteering their energy and concern

to make a difference for others in this community.

We pray for our elected leaders and for all government workers

trying to manage their responsibilities in such challenging times.

We pray for those working for justice,

raising awareness to problems in society and for the earth itself.

And we pray for one another

and for each good purpose we undertake with new resolve this year.

Give us a glimpse of how our hands become your hands, blessed by the Spirit.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

O God,

Jesus faced the suffering around him with compassion,

reaching out to those in pain and grief with healing and hope.

We remember before you those whose lives are wrapped in sorrow or despair,

and those facing tragic death or critical illness…

*Keep silence for 15 seconds.*

We remember those rebuilding lives and communities after flooding and storm

and all those burdened by pain or problems that seem to have no end…

*Keep silence for 15 seconds.*

Embrace each one with your comfort and courage,

and show us what we can offer to make a difference.

Lord, in your mercy,

**Hear our prayer.**

O God in whom we live and move and have our being,

thank you for giving us the courage and commitment we need

to follow Christ in good times and in hard times.

Thank you for the strength we find together as part of your church

and the gifts you give us in each other,

gifts we can rely on as we plan for our ministry and mission

in these ever-changing times.

Help us trust in the promise of your love for us

and energize us with your Spirit

so that we can recognize the opportunities you give us

to live out the grace and mercy we know in Jesus Christ

who taught us to pray together:

**The Lord’s Prayer**

**Hymn:** #569 “O Jesus, I have promised”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ft0suErdaj4>

(Loma Linda University Church)

**Benediction:**

1. Adapted from worship resource for January 16, 2022 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. From worship resources for January 16 available at: <https://presbyterian.ca/worship> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)