

Sunday 27th December (3rd January)
The Moderator's Service

Worship conducted by The Moderator of the General Assembly with contributions from The Moderator's Chaplains and music from The Heart & Soul Swing Band and Community Singers, Esther O'Connor and Alan Campbell. Transcript

Welcome and Call to Worship

Hi everybody. Welcome to worship.
How was your Christmas? How has your year been?

I know some of you have been able to be back in your sanctuaries. Others of you have not been able to set foot within your church for the better part of a year and I can imagine that that has been really tough. Personally speaking, I know how much I have missed being in our buildings and being with my brothers and sisters.

Well today, we are going to worship! It's a special time, the ending of one year the beginning of a new year. We give thanks to God that he has been with us and pray that he will continue to be with us in the time to come.

So together, let us worship God. Let us sing to his praise and glory. We are beginning with a brand-new Christmas song written and played for us by the heart and soul swing band.

Opening Praise: 'Yo ho! Yo ho!

Yo ho! (Yo ho!)
Yo ho! (Yo ho!)
God loves (God loves)
us so! (us so!)
He sent (He sent)
his Son (his Son)
so he (so he)
would show (would show)
God's grace (God's grace)
so free (so free)
for all the world to see (That's you and me!)
Yo ho! Yo ho! We truly know, God loves us so!

When the world was dark as night and in need of saving light (God was there before us)
In a tiny little boy came the gift of Christmas joy (God would soon restore us)
Through his love for you and me it was plain for all to see (God would not ignore us)
As we go from A to Z we're as loved as loved can be, He'll always adore us.

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God's grace (God's grace)
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for all the world to see (That's you and me!)

Yo ho! Yo ho! We truly, truly know God loves us so!

Let me tell it to you straight, coz the news is really great (God got there before us)
Through a tiny little child, we are fully reconciled (God would soon restore us)
When the world was down and out, full of dread and full of doubt (God would not ignore us)
Do not fret and do not fear, God is Love and Love is near! He'll always adore us.

Yo ho! Yo ho! We truly know God loves us so!
Yeah!

Prayer: 'Come let us adore'

Response:

Adore, come let us adore

O come let us adore Him.

The Lord, worship Christ, the Lord.

Let all that is within us, adore.

Almighty and everlasting God, with heads bowed and hearts lifted up, we worship and adore you. For you are from everlasting to everlasting. In the beginning you brought all things into being and when the Time was right, you came among us in Jesus. And so we worship and adore for he is Christ the Lord!

Adore, come let us adore

O come let us adore Him.

The Lord, worship Christ, the Lord.

Let all that is within us, adore.

Lord, your love for us is extravagant beyond description and wholly undeserved. We know we have fallen short. We know we have made for ourselves other gods. We have given our worship in other directions. We have not followed in the footsteps of Jesus as you have invited us to do. And so for your amazing love, we worship, we worship and adore.

Adore, come let us adore

O come let us adore Him.

The Lord, worship Christ, the Lord.

Let all that is within us, adore.

Good and generous God, some ask 'What Child is this?' We answer, 'This is Christ the Lord!' And should give us voices with the angels to adore him, the excitement of the shepherds to speak of him and as those who travelled from afar to bow before him, receive the gift of our hearts. We love you Lord Jesus. We worship and adore you.

Adore, come let us adore

O come let us adore Him.

The Lord, worship Christ, the Lord.

Let all that is within us, adore.

In Jesus' name, we pray Amen.

Bible reading: Luke 2:25-38

Now there was a man in Jerusalem called Simeon, who was righteous and devout. He was waiting for the consolation of Israel, and the Holy Spirit was on him. It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Messiah. Moved by the Spirit, he went into the temple courts.

When the parents brought in the child Jesus to do for him what the custom of the Law required, Simeon took him in his arms and praised God, saying:

“Sovereign Lord, as you have promised,
you may now dismiss[d] your servant in peace.
For my eyes have seen your salvation,
which you have prepared in the sight of all nations:
a light for revelation to the Gentiles,
and the glory of your people Israel.”

The child’s father and mother marveled at what was said about him. Then Simeon blessed them and said to Mary, his mother: “This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against, so that the thoughts of many hearts will be revealed. And a sword will pierce your own soul too.

There was also a prophet, Anna, the daughter of Penuel, of the tribe of Asher. She was very old; she had lived with her husband seven years after her marriage, and then was a widow until she was eighty-four.[e] She never left the temple but worshiped night and day, fasting and praying. Coming up to them at that very moment, she gave thanks to God and spoke about the child to all who were looking forward to the redemption of Jerusalem.

Thanks be to God for his word, Amen.

The Message

The fact of the matter is that I know very little about art. I don't come at it with a critical eye; the most I know is that there are different genres, different time periods, some of which I am drawn to, others less so. But beyond that, my reaction to art is very much a gut reaction. Certain pictures I like, others I don't. Simple as that.

So my knowledge base is very limited but I think I know this; to properly appreciate a painting, you've got to step back. If we are to close, it's difficult if not impossible to see properly. If I am going to see the big picture, yes everything the artist intended, I need to step back. It's a matter of perspective.

These two pictures illustrate the point perfectly. If you home right in on one particular part of the painting, you might conclude that it's a painting about one small detail, for example the dog in the foreground. In fact the dog is just a small part of something that is much bigger scale. You don't get that unless you step back, to get everything in perspective.

If it's true that we need to step back to fully appreciate a painting, then I'd want to suggest that it's equally true for all of life as we try to see it in its fullness and, if at all possible, make sense of it. And if you really want to begin to ponder the big questions - what's it all about and where is God in all of it? - then absolutely you need to step back.

Well stopping might be difficult but absolutely, we can slow down and understand that we are in a long game, not a sprint.

I want to suggest that we need to do the following.

1. We need to **P**ause
2. We need to be **P**atient
3. We need to focus on the **P**ermanent and not just the passing
4. We need to **P**ersist

Number one, pause - which can be so difficult when life is lived at such a pace. There seems to be little time to step back. I think many folks have worked harder and have been busier in these last nine months than at any time before! And if not in offices and work spaces then from one zoom meeting to the next. It's been go, go, go! Friends, take some time to step back, to pause.

Even in the midst of the busyness, it's good to take a moment to focus on that which is a little more enduring than most of what competes for our attention.

Number two.

God acts. God makes good on every promise. God is completing the big picture. It's just that his timescales are of a different order to ours.

That's why we have to be patient. When I call a business or a CallCenter I want to be answered right away, no been put on hold! When I'm web browsing I want instant connection! And don't even start with traffic jams or Scott real delays! I mean I've got a life to live; things to do, places to go, people to see. You know, I'm in a hurry! Let's get this thing moving!

Reading the Bible, I never get the impression that God was in too much of a hurry. Think about Abram for example. He was 75 years of age when the promise was made to him - a promise repeated three times - that he would be the father of a great nation. Don't you think that in the 25 years between promise and fulfilment that he began to wonder if it was going to come to pass?

Or what about God's people in exile? For 70 years they were removed from Jerusalem. Don't you think they ever doubted that God was going to come through for them? Or the thousand years between David and Jesus?

No, God is not in any hurry. And that requires us to be patient in trusting him.

So we pause. We exercise patience. And we remember that that which is permanent is equally as deserving of our attention as that which is passing. That's number three.

Now of course, this modern day church before me is much more recent but there is evidence that there has been Christian worship on this site for some 1300 years. Can you even begin to imagine what happened through all of that time? While people have worshipped on this site, there have been wars, famines, plagues, revolutions, reformations, unions, ups and downs, comings and going is, blessings and curses. All of life.

Even today, all of life streams past the holy place. And the backdrop to all of that? The eternal God who is the same yesterday, today and forever. We are reminded that 'we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish but naught changeth Thee.'

Much passes but much remains.

So there was Simeon, a God-fearing man, waiting for the salvation of his people. How long he waited for, we have no idea, but he never gave up on the promise that was made to him by the spirit, that he would not die before seeing the Messiah, the coming of the Lord. 'The grass withers, the flowers fall but the Word of the Lord and yours for ever.' Simeon persistent.

And beside him, Anna, the old prophetess., no doubt written off by many as an old fool and yet there she was, worshipping, fasting, praying, waiting - trusting that God would deliver on his promise.

That's number four. That's persistence.

Folks, the big picture is that God always keeps his word. Abraham and Sarah were able to have a son. The X sales were able to return to Jerusalem and to rebuild the city walls.

And a descendent of David was born. Jesus. Immanuel.

And Anna and Simeon were able to see that for which they had waited so long. Simeon declared, 'for my eyes have seen the glory of that which you have revealed.'

What about us? Will we pause? Will we exercise patience? Will we keep our eyes open for that which is permanent and not just passing? And like Anna and Simeon, will we persist that we too mate see that God

is acting, that God is with us, that the salvation of God is ours too - and that his Kingdom is coming, little by little, for those who have eyes to see.

I know, in the thick of it, it can be difficult but let us step back that we might see the whole scene of what God has done, is doing right now, and of what God will do in all the days to come.

That's the big picture.

Amen, and may God bless us in this reflecting.

Prayer

'And I said to the man who stood at the gate of the year, give me a light that I may tread safely into the unknown.'

Let us pray,

Lord God, we look back on a year like no other and we could stay looking back, mourning for the loss of lives, the cancelling of so many events, the separation of family and friends. We could stay complaining about all that was done and undone.

But your boundless energy invites us to move forward, taking the energy of your spirit with us as we step into a new year.

Lead us into 2021 with

- expectation of the work and efficacy of vaccines
- expectation of finding you in each month that passes
- expectation that you will comfort and strengthen us to bear the losses
- excitement and a sense of compulsion to serve in your Son's name.
- the assurance that as we travel into the unknown months in front of us, you will love, guard and guide us.

But if we take our own light into the year ahead, we will end up walking on the wrong paths. Let us take the light in the gospel which belongs to our saviour Jesus, that we will, instead of our mistakes, build trust in you as the shining light upon the church that it may know what to do, what to stand for and what to become. Show us the opportunities to serve our neighbours in Jesus' name, telling them and our communities about the faithful God who stays beside us in trouble, loss and loneliness, believing that you are inviting us to be a church that builds be-friends and helps others to believe.

And in Jesus name, we say to the darkness of midwinter, 'I will put my hand into the hand of God and that will be a better light and a way for us to trust.

Amen.

Closing Praise: 'What Child is This?'

What child is this

Who lay to rest

On Mary's lap is sleeping

Whom angels greet with anthems sweet

While shepherds watch are keeping

This, this is Christ the King

Whom shepherds guard and angels sing

*Haste, haste to bring him laud
The Babe, the Son of Mary*

So bring him incense, gold and myrrh
Come peasant king to own him
The King of Kings salvation brings
Let loving hearts enthrone him

*Raise, raise a song on high
The virgin sings a lullaby
Joy, oh joy for Christ is born
The Babe, the son of Mary*

*This, this is Christ the King
Whom shepherds guard and angels sing
Haste, haste to bring him laud
The Babe, the Son of Mary*

*Nails, spears shall pierce him through
The cross he bore for me, for you
Hail, hail the word made flesh
The babe, the son of Mary*

Benediction

Thank you for worshipping with us today.

And now, may the blessing of God Almighty, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, be with you and remain with you, today and forevermore.

Amen.