

Sermon: Appointed and Inscribed

(Sermon inspired by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Johnston, as part of the PWS&D Sunday, preached by the Rev. Paul Wu, at St. Giles, Ottawa, Feb. 2, 2025)

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable to you. O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

Today, we are gathered for PWS&D Sunday, a time when we reflect on the ministry of Christ through the Presbyterian Church in response to development needs around the world. In a world filled with acronyms, we can sometimes get a little lost. For example, LOL means laugh out loud; FOMO is fear of missing out; how about YOLO: you only live once. This morning, we are talking about an acronym that has been with us now for several generations, one particular to us gathered here in the name of Christ ... PWS&D.

PWS&D begins with a 'P', for 'Presbyterian' of course! It begins with us as congregations of God's people, who organize ourselves in a particular way: we understand that we are stronger together, that we can do things and learn things together, that we could not do alone.

Part of being Presbyterian in Canada is our congregational commitment to Presbyterians Sharing, working to contribute 10% of congregational budget to the wider work of the Church, in training new ministers, planting new churches, supporting ministries with Indigenous people, mission work in Canada and around the world.

Another part of being Presbyterian is PWS&D, the Presbyterian World Service & Development, the work of development, relief, and refugee sponsorship that goes beyond our denomination and nation.

We take up this work together according to particular principles. First, our work is inclusive in principle: in service of all peoples, based on needs only, regardless of their culture or religion or race. Second, our work is efficient in principle: administrative costs are kept to a minimum in order to maximize funds for programs. Furthermore, we seek to get matching funds from other sources and through ecumenical collaborations to maximize reach and impact.

PWS&D also operates according to a particular approach. We focus upon communities. We support a school or well or health worker that benefits all. And we work with local partner organizations, through local

people who know their own context, and are already at work in their own communities.

For example, we have projects in 9 countries across Latin America and the Caribbean, Africa and Asia, like working with the *Fraternidad de Presbiteriales Mayas* to support Indigenous women and men in the western highlands of Guatemala, with the Canadian Foodgrains Bank to provide humanitarian aid and long-term food security solutions in the food-insecure Sindh province of Pakistan, and with the Church of Central Africa Presbyterian in Malawi to address agriculture and medical care needs.

As the Presbyterian Church in Canada, we are modest in size but our support for PWS&D is impressive. And yet some may ask: What difference does this work make compared to the magnitude of needs around the world? So great is the suffering and injustice, so oppressive are the powers economic and political - the crises are overwhelming, the issues seem intractable. It might be easy to slip into cynicism, withdrawal, becoming immobilized, and letting our own humanity suffer. It is at times like this that we need to hear anew the Good News of Jesus Christ.

In times of anxiety and depression, Martin Luther would place his hand on his forehead, symbolically recalling the waters of his baptism, and whisper to himself **'I am a child of God'**. And now we lift our hands and we remember *whose* we are. When we feel like night is creeping in, we may recall the words of Charles Beard (the 20th century historian, social reformer, and Quaker) **'When it is dark enough, you can see the stars'**,

In this season of Epiphany, we remember Jesus is the Light of this World. Jesus is our light in the darkness, and the darker it is, the more we see and understand who he is. As Christians, we acknowledge that the light Jesus provides for us comes not only from his life among us two thousand years ago, but through his Spirit with us now, and the hope he reveals to us into the future.

In the concluding book of our Holy Scriptures, the Book of Revelation, we receive a vision of that light that shines from the Risen Lord and from the end of age. One point made in Revelation 21 is that in the resurrection of Jesus, **God grants life beyond life**, not only to each of us individually but to us all together. The wonderful image that shines upon us is that of the Holy City, a declaration that God will renew our humanity completely.

The final image in Scripture of the life to come is not some ethereal existence, nor a pastoral paradise. The life to come is portrayed as a community, through the new Heaven and new Earth, the New Jerusalem,

the Holy City, lively and full, of humanity re-reordered, of human society re-created.

And in the reading from Revelation we heard this morning, we are reminded that as the Holy City comes down from above, with twelve gates, representing the twelve tribes of Israel, and on its foundation stones are inscribed the names of the Apostles.

It is quite remarkable—Heaven founded upon the appointed witness of these ordinary, often-failing individuals. This image, that the foundations of the Holy City are located in the very human lives of the first Christian witnesses. It is an assurance that these relationships of ours now really do matter, that there is something in the way we live now that may be of eternal significance and consequence. What we do here and now shape our eternity together.

Those first Christians who took up the way of Christ in their lives, in healing, teaching, feeding, and embracing those in need, did not see much response in their lifetimes. They actually experienced great uncertainty and even persecution. They were up against empires and evil that were as overwhelming as any that exist today, but their witness was of enduring significance. What they began to reveal is to be made complete by God in the new beginning for humanity, conveyed in this image of the Holy City.

It is this commitment to persevere in the way of Christ now that is heard in the words of the Palestinian Christian pastor, the Rev. Mitri Raheb, of the protestant Christmas Church in Bethlehem. He noted that, almost five years ago, a third of that city's population was Christian, and noted the suffering of the Palestinian people in so many ways, even then, he said **"Am I optimistic? Not at all. I have hope. Hope is different."** Hope for us is in Christ. And based upon that hope, the pastor said **"Even if I thought the world was to end tomorrow, I would plant an olive tree today."** There is both a humility and a perseverance in seeing the light and walking in it, even when darkness is all around us, even when it is within us, in preparation for God's coming kingdom.

Looking to our Living Lord, and his example of a life that God can use and bless eternally, and his resurrection as an assurance of God's coming reign of peace and justice for humanity, we continue to plant olive trees and care for neighbour and stranger ... in faith, in the name of Christ. Even as we are blessed to live in one of the most secure and prosperous nations of the world, our offerings and bequests to support those in need both near and far is becoming more and more clearly a Christian distinctive, a

Christian witness. This witness, known as PWS&D, is about our integrity as Christians, as we entrust its outcomes to God to complete. Yet this witness can have very immediate and personal impact.

We think about PWS&D's work in Gaza, which is having one such impact. Amidst the violence and destruction, many people, including children, are without the normal carefree life they would otherwise enjoy. They have had to flee their homes amidst devastating sights. PWS&D partners, including DSPR (the Department of Service to Palestinian Refugees, part of the Near East Council of Churches) and Catholic Relief Services (through Canadian Foodgrains Bank), continue to provide food, health care, and psychological assistance to as many people as possible.

One way that PWS&D is "planting olive trees" is by responding to the psychological impact of the trauma children and families face daily in Gaza. Rafif is a 6-year-old who escaped the bombing along with her parents and her four siblings. When her mother returned to their home, all she could find was Rafif's favorite toy. For Rafif, playing with this beloved toy gives a sense of normalcy.

PWS&D's partner supports children and mothers through small group and large play sessions, in addition to psychological first aid care. Mental health staff work with schools and shelters to support children to restore some normalcy, providing hope and optimism through psychological and recreational support, connecting parents and children through activities, and use art and play-based activities to provide relief.

PWS&D – Presbyterian World Service & Development – is what we do in the way of Christ, as an act of faith, witnessing to and preparing for the great promises of peace and justice from the One who is faithful. We respond to the life we have received in Christ, by sharing it. We acknowledge the sovereignty of God, by living towards the new beginning God has shown us in Christ. For that we give thanks.

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**