

PWS&D Sunday 2025 Sermon

Written by the Rev. Dr. Andrew Johnston

Sermon

Today, we are gathered for PWS&D Sunday, a time when we reflect on the ministry of Christ through the Church in response to development needs around the world.

It begins with us as congregations of Christ's people who organize ourselves in a particular way: as much as we participate in our own individual spiritual lives and family, we understand that we are stronger together, that we can do things and learn things together, that we could not do alone. (This way is a not always easy, but it is good!)

Another part of being Presbyterian in Canada is PWS&D, which we celebrate this morning, the work of Christ in the world beyond the local church ... the work of development, relief, and refugee sponsorship that goes beyond our congregation and denomination and nation.

We take up this work together as Presbyterian World Service & Development according to particular principles.

Our work is inclusive in principle: whatever is done through PWS&D is in service of all peoples, regardless of their culture or religion, based on needs only.

Our work is efficient in principle: administrative costs are kept to a minimum in order to maximize funds for programs. Furthermore, PWS&D seeks 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.

PWS&D does not send staff from Canada, but works through local people who know their own context best and are already at work in their own communities for good, many of whom are local Christians and their agencies ... 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 a modest denomination in size but our support for PWS&D is impressive. Many across Canada support the work of PWS&D with their time, talent and treasures. Support comes from congregations, monthly donors, special fundraising initiatives, legacy gifts, the list goes on.

And yet you may ask: What difference does our support, and this work, make compared to the magnitude of needs of 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, withdrawing, becoming immobilized, and feel our own humanity suffering. It is at times like this that we need to hear anew the gospel 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 (historian, social reformer, Quaker of the first half of the 20th century) '**When it is dark enough, you can see the stars**', and we can lift our eyes again to see Christ and his coming kingdom of peace and justice. This is a theme running all through the season of Epiphany ... Jesus, the Light of this World.

Jesus is our light in the darkness, and the darker it is, the more we see and understand the light he is. He reveals the Holy and Eternal One who enters our darkness for us and our salvation, the love of God made real for us as Jesus teaches, embraces, feeds, and heals.

In his life among us, Jesus shows us how God responds to suffering and tragedy, entering and addressing it. And in his resurrection Jesus shows us that evil and death are all real but they are not ultimate, that the will of God is fullness of life, now and eternally.

As Christians, we acknowledge that the light Jesus provides for us comes not only from his life among us two millennia ago, or his Spirit with us now, but also and equally from the future.

In the concluding book of our Holy Scriptures, Revelation, we receive a vision of the light that shines from the Risen Lord and the end of history.

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 an individual existence, not even a pastoral paradise. The life to come is portrayed as a community, the Holy City, lively and full. This is an image of humanity re-created, of human society reordered.

And in the reading from Revelation we heard this morning, we are reminded that as the Holy City comes down from above, on its foundation stones are engraved the names of the apostles. It is quite remarkable, Heaven founded upon the witness of these ordinary, oft-failing individuals. This image, that the foundations of the Holy City are located in the very human lives of Christians, 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.

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, and what they began is revealed to be completed 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, the Rev. Mitri Raheb, pastor of the protestant Christmas Church in Bethlehem for some decades now. Over five years ago, noting that almost a third of that city's population was Christian and detailing 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 completion.

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.

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, and we entrust its outcomes to God to complete. But 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 have faced 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, provide hope and optimism through psychological and recreational support, connect parents and children through the 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.

Prayer After Sermon

Holy God,
we believe that beyond the dark skies a star shines,
we believe that we are not alone,
we believe that people and this world can change.

Holy God,
our faith is founded upon Jesus Christ,
his birth, life, death and resurrection;
our faith is in knowing Jesus Christ
and his promise of life in all its fullness for all humanity.
So now, O God, help us to live as a people who believe, a people of faith,
who stand and act now in the light of the days Christ is bringing,
who take up Christ's work towards his world of peace and justice.

In Jesus' name, Amen