

New Scotland Presbyterian Church  
Worship for the Fourth Sunday of Advent  
(video link at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>)  
December 20, 2020  
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

Ryan Dwyer

"I'm Dreaming of a White Christmas"

Introduction

*Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church.*

*Our Christmas Eve service is this Thursday! It will be a YouTube Premiere event. The video will be up at 7:00 p.m., and we can all watch it together, with the opportunity to share greetings and comments in chat. If you are a subscriber to the New Scotland Presbyterian Church channel on YouTube, you will see the notifications of when the video will premiere. If not, we will also be sending out the email link, as we do for all our worship videos. If you cannot join us at 7:00 p.m. on Christmas Eve, never fear! The worship video will remain on YouTube, along with the rest of our worship videos, so you can watch it any time.*

*We would love it if you would send a Christmas card to the church. Mail in your cards, and we'll share them on our videos during the twelve days of Christmas!*

*We are nearing the end of the season of Advent, waiting and preparing for the coming of God into the world. Today and tomorrow are longest nights of the year for us, with 15 hours of darkness. So today we light all four Advent candles, to show our faith in the light of God overcoming all darkness. Let us begin our worship with the lighting of the Advent candles!*

Lighting the Advent Candles

The Gordon Family

**Gracious God, we thank you for your promise that you will be with us always. We rejoice with Mary, for Love is coming in the flesh! Keep us faithful to respond to the world with the same compassion shown by Jesus, the Prince of Love. Amen.**

Hymn

Choir

"Once in Royal David's City" #49 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Opening Prayer

(based on Ruth C. Duck from Touch Holiness; used with permission)

God of the loving heart, your eternal Word took flesh when Mary placed her life at the service of your will. Let your Word speak to us as we prepare our hearts for his coming again. We confess before you those places in our hearts where we have refused you entrance: people we have refused to love; habits we never get around to changing; good things we have left undone; and ways in which we hurt you, ourselves, and others. Come to us in the light of your Christ. Make bright those places we have hidden from you. Show us new ways to live. Sweep clean the rooms of our hearts, that Christ may find a home among us. We pray in his name. Amen.

### Words of Assurance

Dear friends: God's love and mercy continually reach out for us, encouraging us to release the things that distract us and weigh us down, so that we may be free to follow our Savior. For our God is a God of new beginnings, and offers them to each of us. Thanks be to God! Amen.

### Psalter Luke 1:46-55

<sup>46</sup> And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, <sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, <sup>48</sup> for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; <sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. <sup>50</sup> His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. <sup>51</sup> He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. <sup>52</sup> He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; <sup>53</sup> he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. <sup>54</sup> He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, <sup>55</sup> according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

### Kids' Time

*For those unable to see the video, the children's sermon is about when Mary found out she was going to be Jesus' mother, she sang a song of thanksgiving. Now it's time to see the photos that remind us of God's love and hope and joy. {photos.}*

*Keep sending us your photos so we can share them in the coming weeks! We would also love it if you would send a Christmas card to the church so we can share greetings!*

Prayer: Dear God, when we count our blessings it can make us want to sing for joy! Help us to be so thankful, that we sing our favorite Christmas songs, and share what we have, and reach out to help people in need. Help us to always be friends of Jesus. We pray in his name. Amen.

### Gospel Lesson Luke 1:26-38

<sup>26</sup> In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup> to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup> And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." <sup>29</sup> But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup> The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup> And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." <sup>34</sup> Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" <sup>35</sup> The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. <sup>36</sup> And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. <sup>37</sup> For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup> Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

## Sermon

As we stand on the threshold of Christmas, it is not surprising to hear the story of the angel's announcement to Mary that she will bear the Son of God into the world. But it may seem surprising to consider that same announcement comes to each one of us. Each of us, like Mary, in our own way, is chosen by God to bring Jesus into the world.

We might struggle with that idea. We hear the angel say that Mary is favored, and, too often we think that means that Mary was God's favorite. But, really, we know that God does not play favorites. God shows favor to all of us. The question is whether we accept that favor, or continue to push it aside, feeling that we are somehow unworthy.

Our modern lives are full of competition – we are taught that if we only try hard enough, we will win the love and approval of family and friends; if we only study long enough we will get good grades and validate our sense of self-worth. So we may also believe that if we only pray long enough we will earn God's love and blessing. But, it is simply not true. God favors us because God created us, and God loves us without our doing anything to earn it. We are, each and every one, favored by God.

Mary is called "blessed," which is just another way of saying being aware of God's presence. Too often people say they are blessed, when what they really mean is that things are going pretty well, life is easy. But when life is difficult, when from all outward appearances we may even say we are cursed, it is in those difficult times that we sometimes recognize blessings most clearly. I once heard a news story about a woman who was hit and pinned underneath a bus. Our first instinct is probably to say she was not blessed in getting hit by a bus. But, as she was trapped, and listening to the emergency responders trying to figure out how to get the bus off of her, one policeman crawled halfway under the bus and held her hand and talked to her and stayed with her until she was freed. That was a blessing to her in the midst of a really awful circumstance.

In today's story Mary is called favored and blessed, but we also are favored and blessed. Rather than thinking Mary is so different from us, it might be better if we think of her as the first disciple. She is the first, in the story of Jesus, to hear God's call upon her life, and respond by saying, "Yes."

Her story reminds us that our God loves us enough to enlist us to help as God moves in the world. Jesus called ordinary people to be his disciples. His story begins with an ordinary person, Mary, called to do something for God. We are the ordinary people of this time, and God calls each of us to something that furthers God's work in the world.

And, like Mary, we have a choice. We can say, 'yes, I will live my life guided by God's purpose;' or, 'no, I will not.' Life brings us many surprises: <sup>[1]</sup> unforeseen diagnoses, unexpected babies, aging parents, job reversals, the unending progress of technology, even pandemics. In this life, terrible things happen and wonderful things happen. We choose how we will respond to all the unexpected twists and turns of life – whether we meet them by reaching out for God's grace, or whether we muscle through on our own willpower.

We can decide to try to be entirely self-reliant, saying "no" to whatever plans God may put before us. We can be stoic, refuse to accept the invitation, put all of our energy into ignoring it. We can become angry, actively defending ourselves and trying to force

life go the way we want it to go. We can become bitter, comparing ourselves to everyone else whose life seems more agreeable, and lamenting our unhappy fate.

Or, like Mary, we can say, “yes.” We can be the daredevil, test pilot, gambler for God. We can choose to take part in a plan we did not make, doing things we never expected, for reasons we may not entirely understand. We can take part in God’s crazy scheme with no script and no guarantees. Like Mary, we can agree to smuggle God into the world inside our own bodies.

Saying ‘yes’ does not mean we are unafraid; it just means we are not willing to let our fear keep us locked up. Mary’s story encourages us to say ‘yes’ to the angel; to say, “here I am; let it be with me according to your word.” When we say ‘yes,’ we become one more disciple, willing to make God known in this world.

Listen again for God’s message to you: Greetings, favored one! You are blessed! The Lord is with you! Do not be afraid. For nothing is impossible with God. This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

### Song

Choir

“So Let It Be”

### Pastoral Prayer

Dear God, we have so many blessings, and we thank you for time to reflect on all that is good in our lives – good food, warm shelter, loving families, and caring friends. We give thanks for doctors and nurses and researchers who give of themselves to keep us healthy. We give thanks for postal workers and delivery people, those who work in restaurants and grocery stores and retail to provide us the things we need. We give thanks for police officers, and firefighters, EMT’s, soldiers, and all first responders who work to keep us safe.

And we lift up our prayers for all those who find it difficult to count blessings this day – those who are cold, hungry, lonely, afraid, depressed, addicted, imprisoned, sick, unemployed, hopeless, or desperate. We remember in a special way all those who have lost loved ones, and are mourning in the midst of this holiday season. We remember those for whom fear is an ever-present companion, sowing seeds of uncertainty, discontent, cynicism, and defensiveness. Help us to reach out in kindness to all who are isolated, all who feel unseen, all who are longing for some human contact in these dark, cold days.

God of mercy, you sent us Jesus to show us how to live; give us the courage we need to be his eyes and his ears; his hands and his heart, for the people you love in this world that you created.

And hear us as we say the prayer he taught us:

### Lord’s Prayer

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors; and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, forever. Amen.

## Hymn

Choir

“It Came Upon the Midnight Clear” #38 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

## Offering

Scripture says, “All things in heaven and earth belong to God, who is coming in glory to reveal a new creation. So, let us offer our lives to the Lord.” (2 Peter 3:8-15)

*We give thanks for the many gifts God has given us –our finances, our abilities, and our relationships – there are so many ways for us to be connected to one another and to lift each other up. Churches depend on the generosity of members and friends to support their ministries of doing God’s work in a broken world. If you are able to mail in an offering, or give online at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>, we are grateful. If all you can offer is prayers for the church, we love you for that gift. We are blessed to share our gifts and to love one another. Thank you for your generous giving!*

## Song of Praise

Ryan Dwyer

*These are probably the most-sung lines in the last 300 years, so here are both the traditional words, and another variation:*

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise God, all creatures here below;  
Praise God above, you heavenly host;  
Praise Father, Son, and Holy Ghost.

Praise God from whom all blessings flow;  
Praise Christ the Word in flesh born low;  
Praise Holy Spirit evermore;  
One God, Triune, whom we adore.

## Benediction and Blessing

As we come to the last days of our Advent time of waiting, hear again these words from scripture “May the God of peace make you holy in every way and keep your whole being—spirit, soul, and body—free from every fault until the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ” (1 Thess 5:23). Prepare the way of the Lord (Isa 40:3; Mark 1:3)! Amen and amen.

## Choral Benediction

Choir

“Come, Emmanuel!”

## Postlude

Ryan Dwyer

“I’m Dreaming of a White Christmas”

## Sermon Note

<sup>[1]</sup>The rest of this paragraph and the following three paragraphs are based on a reflection by the Rev. Will Willimon in "Pulpit Resource," vol. 27, no. 4, for December 19, 1999.