

New Scotland Presbyterian Church  
Worship for the First Sunday in Lent  
(video link at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>)  
February 21, 2021  
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

“Minuet in G Major”

Ryan Dwyer

Introduction

*Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church as we begin the season of Lent.*

Call to Worship

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God.

Matthew 4:4

Hymn

“Come, Thou Almighty King” #139 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Choir

Opening Prayer

God of mercy, you sent Jesus Christ to seek and save the lost. We confess that we have strayed from you and turned aside from your way. We are misled by pride, for we see ourselves pure when we are stained, and great when we are small. Too often we have failed in love, neglected justice, and ignored your truth. Have mercy, O God, and forgive our shortcomings. May this time of worship be sacred, shaped beyond this world, so that we may encounter You. Let your Word speak to us, and take root in us. Throughout these forty days, unseal within us the wellspring of your grace, cleanse our hearts of all that is not holy, and cause your gift of new life to flourish once again. Grant this through Jesus Christ our Redeemer. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Dear friends in Christ: God sees all that we do, and all that we neglect to do. Yet God does not turn away from us, but turns toward us, offering wholeness to our lives and our communities, for our God is a god of new beginnings. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson Genesis 9:8-17

<sup>8</sup> Then God said to Noah and to his sons with him, <sup>9</sup> “As for me, I am establishing my covenant with you and your descendants after you, <sup>10</sup> and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the domestic animals, and every animal of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. <sup>11</sup> I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth.” <sup>12</sup> God said, “This is the sign of the covenant that I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for all future generations: <sup>13</sup> I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between me and the earth. <sup>14</sup> When I bring clouds over the earth and the bow is seen in the clouds, <sup>15</sup> I will remember my covenant that is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh; and the waters shall never again become a flood to destroy all flesh. <sup>16</sup> When the

bow is in the clouds, I will see it and remember the everlasting covenant between God and every living creature of all flesh that is on the earth.”<sup>17</sup> God said to Noah, “This is the sign of the covenant that I have established between me and all flesh that is on the earth.”

### Kids' Time

*For those unable to see the video, the children's sermon is about how, after the great flood, God decided that it was not right to fight evil by destruction, so God made a symbol of hanging the weapon of a bow up in the sky. Whenever we see a rainbow we can remember that God does not want us to fight and hurt others. God wants us to keep loving, even when it's really, really hard to do. 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!*

Prayer: Dear God, there are so many times when we get frustrated and think if everyone would just do things our way, then we would be happy. Help us to remember when we get frustrated, it is better to turn to you, and to let your love heal the anger and frustration inside us, so that we do not take it out on others. Help us to come to you every day, O God, so you can keep filling us up with your love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Gospel Lesson Mark 1:9-15

<sup>9</sup> In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. <sup>10</sup> And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. <sup>11</sup> And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

<sup>12</sup> And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. <sup>13</sup> He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

<sup>14</sup> Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, <sup>15</sup> and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

### Sermon

Today is the first Sunday in the season of Lent. Lent is the 40 days before Easter. It is the oldest season observed by the church. The thing that created the first Christians was their belief that Jesus had been resurrected from the dead. These first followers of Jesus were Jewish, so they observed the Sabbath, as they always had, and then on the first day of the week, they celebrated the resurrection. So, each Sunday became a kind of “little Easter” to observe the resurrection. And, each year, Easter was celebrated just after the Passover, to commemorate the events that they had gone through.

So, those were the first distinctly-Christian forms of worship: to celebrate the resurrection every Sunday, and to celebrate Easter every year. Because the resurrection was being celebrated every week, the church decided to do something special to prepare for Easter. And so they instituted this time of forty days leading up to Easter as a time to prepare ourselves for this most important Christian event. You'll

notice that the Sundays in Lent are not part of the forty days – that’s because on Sundays we are always celebrating the resurrection, just as the very first followers did.

As we heard in this morning’s gospel, Jesus went out into the wilderness for forty days just after he was baptized, as he prepared to begin his ministry. This is the basis of the forty days of Lent. It is a time of preparation – a time to be intentional about listening for God’s word to us. And so we follow Jesus’ example of getting out of our routine in order to hear more clearly what God is saying. It might seem counter-intuitive for us to stop our daily lives in order to find God – after all, God could break into our existence any time, and wouldn’t that get our attention even more, if God suddenly appeared in the middle of our living room? But, God is always waiting for us to take a step toward God. God wants us to come closer out of a sense of desire, not out of fear.

Often we speak about the time of Lent as a journey, and maybe we need to think about this journey in a counterintuitive way. I have heard of cultures who do not travel by day – which to most of us, seems the logical thing to do – travel in the daylight, so you can see where you are going. But there are those, like some cultures of the South Pacific, who put their boats in at night, so they can navigate by the stars. They need the light of day to fade, in order to see the signs that can point them in the right direction. It’s also how the magi likely traveled to see Jesus. That’s what Lent is for us: a time to dim the ordinary light of day, so that we can look for the signs God has provided.

God has been providing signs to humanity for as long as we have known God. In today’s Old Testament reading, we had the wonderful story of God making a promise and giving a sign of that promise at the end of the great flood. As we know, the flood was God’s first attempt to eradicate evil from the world. At the beginning of the story, God sees that human beings are so wicked they cannot even imagine good things. So, God decides to eliminate the evil altogether. In all the world, God finds one good man and so saves Noah and his family to have a new beginning.

If we read the whole story, we find that in one way, the flood is a huge failure. It is a failure because the flood does not do what God intended. The flood did not rid the world of evil. And even the one good man that God saved turns out not to be much different than all the humans that were destroyed. When Noah and his family leave the ark and make an altar of burnt offerings to God, God says, “I will never again curse the ground because of humankind, for the inclination of the human heart is evil from youth.” God brought the flood to get rid of the evil inhabiting the human soul, but when it’s all over, God has to admit that evil lurks in the hearts of even the very best humans.

So, from that perspective, the flood was a failure. It did not solve the problem of evil in the world. But if we look at the story as one about God, the flood is very meaningful – because it does change God. At the end of the flood, God decides that God must make a promise not to destroy every living creature again. God decides to change tactics in how God will deal with us. God says God will not try to destroy us again, and as proof, God hangs up the weapon of destruction so that we all can see it. As I said in the kids’ time, God takes the bow, used to take life, and hangs it in the sky, so that all of humanity will be reminded that God has had a change of heart in how God will deal with us.

In this gesture we see the first indication that God will no longer use evil to fight evil, but will use love as the way to conquer sin. And God does not set any conditions on God’s promise. God does not say, ‘if you worship me, I promise not to destroy you;’

or, 'if you bring me offerings, I promise not to destroy you.' God makes the promise without condition. In making this promise God is not free; God has made an unbreakable promise; and in that promise God has given us hope. Because in that promise, God has made a commitment to the world, to stand by it no matter what.

In these times when we hear the news of doom, defeat, despair, destruction, division, and death, louder and louder each day, I cannot imagine a more relevant story for us to hear. We are hungry to hear God's word to us, to find God's presence in the midst of all the awful things we see in the world – and here it is. God promises not to destroy us, but to stand with us in the midst of whatever difficulty comes our way.

When Jesus is out in the wilderness, we are told that he was tempted in every way – AND – the angels waited on him. Even Jesus dealt with the difficulty of the human situation – that we are susceptible to both good and evil, and we have to deal with both as long as we are living in this world. And we see even in this one verse the evidence of God's faithfulness to the promise – for even while Jesus is dealing with temptation, the angels are also present and ministering to him.

That is the promise God makes to us. God does not promise that we will not be touched by sadness, or tragedy, or injustice, or evil, but God does promise to be with us in everything. God's presence is a promise that we will not be overcome by evil. As one writer has said, "in the present age where death and destruction are still with us, God's grace grows roses from ashes by defying evil in the process of ultimately defeating it."<sup>1</sup>

That is our Lenten gift – to know that God is present, and to see the signs of God's love for us. God gave us the bow in the heavens, and God gave us the person of Jesus. As we make our way through this Lenten season, let us dim the ordinary sounds and routines of our lives, to see the signs that God has given us, and be pointed again in the right direction of God's Way.

This is the Word of the Lord for us. Thanks be to God. Amen.

### Song

"Great Is the Lord"

Choir

### Africa Partner Prayers

*{We share prayers with Albany Westminster and three congregations in Ghana, Africa, every month. Pastor Holly shares some of those prayers in this time.}*

### Pastoral Prayer

O God, we give you thanks for those who find joy in even the harshest circumstances, that we might learn from their example to carry our cross in the sight of the world, while pointing away from ourselves to Jesus. We give thanks for his example, and ask for his strength to live up to our calling.

As Jesus reached out to serve the world, may our hands serve our community in love, so that those whose hands are empty will be filled.

As Jesus reached out to creation, may our living be sacred, allowing us to walk gently on this good earth.

As Jesus reached out to the unwelcome, may we befriend those who come into our days; and may our homes be a refuge of peace and hospitality.

As Jesus reached beyond this world, may your way be ever before us, shaping our decisions, our actions, and our way of being.

Hear us, as we pray 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

"Lord, Who Throughout These Forty Days" #81 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

### Offering

Sisters and Brothers, Jesus gave everything to us, and he promises that everything we lose in his name we will gain again. God asks us to give joyfully, in gratitude for all that God has given us.

*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 for that gift of financial support. If all you can offer is prayers, we love you for the gift of that spiritual support for our church, and for our ministry in this community and in the world. 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 who loves us, great and small  
Praise God who hears our faintest call  
The Sovereign Lamb redeemed the fall  
Praise God the Savior, Lord of all.

### Benediction and Blessing

Hear these words of hope from Jesus: If you want to become my followers, then you must deny yourselves, and take up your cross, and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. May the courage, compassion, confidence, and clarity that Christ carried on his journey be yours for this Lenten journey. Amen.

### Choral Benediction

Choir

"Amen"

### Postlude

Ryan Dwyer

"Minuet in G Major"

## Sermon Note

<sup>1</sup> Marion Soards, Thomas Dozeman, Kendall McCabe; Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary Year B: Lent/Easter; 1993; Abingdon Press; p. 26