

New Scotland Presbyterian Church
Worship for the Twenty-fourth Sunday after Pentecost
(video link at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>)
November 15, 2020
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

Ryan Dwyer

“O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”

Introduction

Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church as we come to the end of the Christian year. This is the second-to-last Sunday before we begin a new liturgical year.

Two announcements before we begin our service. First, this is our stewardship season. Stewardship letters and pledge cards were mailed out this week, and we ask you to prayerfully consider your commitment to supporting our church in the coming year. Pledge cards are not a contract; if your circumstances change through the year, you are able to change your pledge; but we ask you to return the pledge cards so our finance folks have a way of putting together a budget; without the cards they just have to guess. Also, we are so grateful to those who have been supporting us through this pandemic, and if you would like to make a commitment for the coming year, we would be happy to send you a pledge card and include you in our circle of giving.

Second, as I've mentioned, with the uncertainty about numbers and cases rising right now, the Session decided we will have a recorded service for Christmas Eve. We would love to have many of you involved in that service, with a reading or some other aspect of worship. Of course, before Christmas comes Advent, and we would also love to have some families volunteer to come and light the candles on the Advent wreath for the coming Sundays. So if are willing to do any of those things, please let us know.

Call to Worship

Isaiah 12:6

Shout aloud and sing for joy, for great in our midst is the Holy One.

Hymn

Choir

“Holy God, We Praise Your Name” #460 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Opening Prayer

Ever-living God, before the earth was formed and even after it shall cease to be, you are God. Break into our short span of life and show us the things that are eternal. Give us faith to be steadfast amidst the tumults of this world. Release us from all our offenses, and deliver us from all proud thoughts and vain desires, that with reverent and humble hearts we may draw near to you, be enveloped by your grace, and find in you our refuge and strength. Teach us what you desire that we may serve your purpose and know your joy. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Beloved in Christ: God sends grace to us like rain on the earth, cleansing our hearts and renewing our spirits. Our Creator cherishes us and invites us to new beginnings. Thanks be to God! Amen.

Gospel Lesson Matthew 25:14-30

¹⁴ "For it is as if a man, going on a journey, summoned his slaves and entrusted his property to them; ¹⁵ to one he gave five talents, to another two, to another one, to each according to his ability. Then he went away. ¹⁶ The one who had received the five talents went off at once and traded with them, and made five more talents. ¹⁷ In the same way, the one who had the two talents made two more talents. ¹⁸ But the one who had received the one talent went off and dug a hole in the ground and hid his master's money. ¹⁹ After a long time the master of those slaves came and settled accounts with them. ²⁰ Then the one who had received the five talents came forward, bringing five more talents, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me five talents; see, I have made five more talents.' ²¹ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²² And the one with the two talents also came forward, saying, 'Master, you handed over to me two talents; see, I have made two more talents.' ²³ His master said to him, 'Well done, good and trustworthy slave; you have been trustworthy in a few things, I will put you in charge of many things; enter into the joy of your master.' ²⁴ Then the one who had received the one talent also came forward, saying, 'Master, I knew that you were a harsh man, reaping where you did not sow, and gathering where you did not scatter seed; ²⁵ so I was afraid, and I went and hid your talent in the ground. Here you have what is yours.' ²⁶ But his master replied, 'You wicked and lazy slave! You knew, did you, that I reap where I did not sow, and gather where I did not scatter? ²⁷ Then you ought to have invested my money with the bankers, and on my return I would have received what was my own with interest. ²⁸ So take the talent from him, and give it to the one with the ten talents. ²⁹ For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away. ³⁰ As for this worthless slave, throw him into the outer darkness, where there will be weeping and gnashing of teeth.'

Kids' Time

For those unable to see the video, the children's sermon is about how we all have different talents and when we share them with love then we all get what we need. 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, thank you for trusting each and every one of us with gifts and talents. Help us never to feel that what we have to offer is too small or not worthwhile. Help us to share everything we can share, so that everyone will have enough of what they need – enough attention, enough laughter, and enough love to get through the day. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.

Old Testament Lesson Judges 4:1-7

¹ The Israelites again did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, after Ehud died. ² So the LORD sold them into the hand of King Jabin of Canaan, who reigned in Hazor; the commander of his army was Sisera, who lived in Harosheth-ha-goiim. ³ Then the Israelites cried out to the LORD for help; for he had nine hundred chariots of iron, and had oppressed the Israelites cruelly twenty years.

⁴ At that time Deborah, a prophetess, wife of Lappidoth, was judging Israel. ⁵ She used to sit under the palm of Deborah between Ramah and Bethel in the hill country of Ephraim; and the Israelites came up to her for judgment. ⁶ She sent and summoned Barak son of Abinoam from Kedesh in Naphtali, and said to him, "The LORD, the God of Israel, commands you, 'Go, take position at Mount Tabor, bringing ten thousand from the tribe of Naphtali and the tribe of Zebulun. ⁷ I will draw out Sisera, the general of Jabin's army, to meet you by the Wadi Kishon with his chariots and his troops; and I will give him into your hand.'"

Epistle Lesson First Thessalonians 5:1-11

Now concerning the times and the seasons, brothers and sisters, you do not need to have anything written to you. ² For you yourselves know very well that the day of the Lord will come like a thief in the night. ³ When they say, "There is peace and security," then sudden destruction will come upon them, as labor pains come upon a pregnant woman, and there will be no escape! ⁴ But you, beloved, are not in darkness, for that day to surprise you like a thief; ⁵ for you are all children of light and children of the day; we are not of the night or of darkness. ⁶ So then let us not fall asleep as others do, but let us keep awake and be sober; ⁷ for those who sleep sleep at night, and those who are drunk get drunk at night. ⁸ But since we belong to the day, let us be sober, and put on the breastplate of faith and love, and for a helmet the hope of salvation. ⁹ For God has destined us not for wrath but for obtaining salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁰ who died for us, so that whether we are awake or asleep we may live with him. ¹¹ Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing.

Sermon

I think many times we come to worship as a refuge from the harsh world. When it feels like the world is out of control – and isn't that what this whole year has felt like? – when the world seems out of control, we come to worship to find comfort, and reassurance that things are not as bad as they seem. If we are feeling unloved or unlovable, abandoned, left out or left behind, we come here to be reminded that our God is a God of love who is always seeking us out, always welcoming us back, always longing for a deeper relationship with us. I think we often come to worship hoping we will feel better at the end of it.

So it is difficult when we have scripture passages like the ones this morning – passages that are not particularly upbeat. These are probably not the stories we go to for inspiration when we are feeling bad.

The Old Testament story from Judges starts with three people: God's prophet, Deborah; the Israelite general, Barak; and the enemy general, Sisera. The prophet Deborah tells General Barak that God will help defeat the foreign army led by General

Sisera. The logical assumption is that the armies will meet and the Israelites will conquer their enemy on the battlefield, but the story actually goes on to tell how General Sisera is betrayed by a woman named Jael, who kills him by hammering a tent peg through his temple while he is asleep. Not exactly a feel-good story, though you might like to go read all the details if you are a fan of true crime stories.

In the epistle lesson, we hear Paul's comments about the end times. How they will come without warning; how there will be no escape from the destruction will come; that the Day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night. Again, these are not images of comfort.

And, of course, the gospel lesson is the familiar parable of the talents where we see the last servant reprimanded for being afraid, and his punishment: to be thrown into the outer darkness.

So if we have come to worship today hoping to feel better, these passages are a challenge. They seem to fall into the fire-and-brimstone category where the message is that no matter how hard we try it will never be good enough and God will inevitably punish us. So how do we keep from feeling worse at the end of the service than when we started?

In spite of their grim character, I think these passages do offer us words of encouragement. Because each of them instructs us to live our lives to the fullest, trusting in the gifts that God has given us. Living in fear can paralyze us, which means we might stop living altogether.

The more I listen to these passages, the more I hear the message of the angels: "Be not afraid." In the story from Judges, Deborah and Barak and Jael all take action as they seek to fulfill God's promise to defeat the enemy. Barak goes out for the battle and asks Deborah to go with him. And she does. Jael recognizes trouble when it comes to her door, but does not try to run away from it; she welcomes the enemy in until she can figure out what to do. None of these people sits back and simply waits, expecting that God will swoop in and solve their problems for them. They do the things they know how to do, and they trust that God is, somehow, in the midst of it all.

The Thessalonians were concerned over Paul's teaching of the end times, and some of them had given up their work and routines to sit and wait for the return of Christ. Paul's words that we do not know when the end will come are meant to be words of comfort, not words of threat. He says that because we know the end will come, but do not know exactly when, then we can rest assured that God means for us to live our lives to the fullest; to use the gifts we have been given without being afraid. We are reminded that even Jesus did not know when the end was to come, so there is no need for us to be paralyzed with fear – because the end just means that we will be closer to God. And being closer to God is something we already want; it's not something to make us fearful.

Jesus' parable is similar: the good news of the parable is that God has given gifts to each and every one of us; we do not all have the same gifts, or in the same measure, but each of us is given gifts and God simply asks us to use them. We cannot be so afraid that we do nothing and stop living.

I think the problem with how we hear these stories is that we focus on the fear in them, instead of the joy. Paul says that, as Christians, we are children of the light and children of the day, and so we have nothing to be afraid of. If we are living the faith,

hope, and love of God, then God coming just gives us more faith and hope and love. In the parable the Master is so pleased with the faithfulness of the first two that their reward is to “enter into the joy of [their] master.”

It is the promise of joy that keeps us coming back to worship. The world fills us with fear – I feel like so much of television and e-mail and internet stories and social media is telling stories whose message is: you should be afraid – here is something terrible that has happened, or is happening, or might happen, so you should be afraid, be afraid, be afraid! We are bombarded with the problems of the world (whether they are real or not), so it does not seem fair to come to worship and be confronted with stories that add to our fears.

Scripture can help us hold on to the promise of joy, but, somehow, it is the fear that seems to stick to us – we read this gospel story and say: what if I am the one who gets the one talent and I make the wrong choice?

So, here is another way to look at it. My clergy friend Steve says: “In this parable, you are not the slave who got the one talent, [or even the two, or the five]. You are the talents. You are what God has given to the world. How will you be spent? What voices or forces [try to] bury you and prevent you from giving the gifts God has created in you? What [are the] things [that] engage you [and encourage you] in giving those gifts to the world?”^[1] What are the things that engage you so that you engage others, and their talents get shared, so that the talents going into the world are multiplied over and over again?

“Your life [is a gift that has been given to the world for] God’s purposes. So, invest it wisely. Give it away mindfully. Spend it faithfully.”^[2] You are the gift. And you are never nothing.

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

Song
“Even Now”

Choir

Pastoral Prayer

We give you our thanks, almighty and gracious God, for the blessings we know. We are grateful for a night of rest and the opportunity to begin a new day. Thank you for the rhythms of day and night, work and rest, sunshine and clouds, summer and winter. Thank you for the gift of music and for sounds and words that please our ears and delight our souls. Help us to count, each day, those moments when your grace breaks through to us, so that we are not overwhelmed with negativity, but live with gratitude.

In this time, we also lift up our prayers of intercession. We pray today for the leaders of nations and ask that they would care for their people and for the earth, and work for peace and justice and healing in their own countries and among the nations of the world.

We pray for relief in this ongoing pandemic. We are grateful for doctors and nurses and hospital workers, for scientists and researchers, for all who relieve the suffering of those who are ill, and are working hard to find treatments. We give thanks to those who work to keep our lives in some rhythm of normalcy: for postal workers, and truckers, and grocery staff, and delivery people, for bus drivers, and road workers, and first responders. Protect all who risk their own health for the benefit of our communities.

We pray for those who are seeking deliverance. O God of compassion, watch over the many who live where there is violence, or the threat of violence, or poverty or hunger, or homelessness. Be with those who are ill, or grieving, or lonely, or unemployed, or in prison, or imprisoned by addiction. Grant your healing to all broken people and broken places and broken hearts.

Encourage those who are strong and confident that they may share their gifts. In all we do, and all we say, and all we type in email, and all we post on social media, help us to be recognizable followers of Jesus. 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

"God, Whose Giving Knows No Ending" #341 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Offering

Jesus said, "Give and it will be given to you. A good measure, pressed down, shaken together, and running over, will poured into your lap. For with the measure you use, it will be measured to you" (Luke 6:38).

We give thanks for the many talents God has given us – both our finances and our abilities. 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 do is offer prayers for the church, we love you for that gift. Whether it's money, time, attention, a phone call, a text, an e-mail, a smile, a decoration in your window or yard – there are so many ways we can reach out to others and know we are not alone. We are blessed to share our talents 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, all creatures here below;
Praise Holy Spirit, Comforter;
One God, Triune, whom we adore.

Benediction and Blessing

Hear again the words from Paul: "May the God of peace sanctify you entirely; and may your spirit and soul and body be kept sound and blameless at the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess 5:23). Let us go forth, remembering we are children of God, choosing to follow the way of Christ, trusting that the blessing of the Spirit goes with us, both this day and always. Amen.

Choral Benediction

Choir

You shall go out with joy and be led forth with peace,
and the mountains and the hills shall break forth before you.
There'll be shouts of joy and the trees of the field shall clap, shall clap their hands.
And the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and the trees of the field shall clap their hands,
and you'll go out with joy.

Postlude

Ryan Dwyer

"O Beautiful for Spacious Skies"

Sermon Notes

^[1] The Rev. Steve Garnaas-Holmes, "Unfolding Light," November 13, 2008.

^[2] *ibid.*