

New Scotland Presbyterian Church  
Worship for the Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost  
(video link at <https://www.newscotlandpc.com/>)  
November 8, 2020  
The Rev. Holly S. Cameron

Prelude

Ryan Dwyer

“O Beautiful for Spacious Skies”

Introduction

*Welcome to worship at New Scotland Presbyterian Church.*

*With the uncertainty about numbers and cases rising right now, the Session has decided we will have a recorded service for Christmas Eve. We would love to have many of you involved in that service, so if you are willing to do a reading or some other aspect of worship, please let us know. We'll be setting up a schedule to record people individually in the coming weeks.*

*Thank you to the Brenda for the beautiful autumn arrangements on the pulpit, given to the glory of God for today's service.*

Call to Worship

God asks us to turn away from the things of the world that grasp for our attention – like, wealth, popularity, and power – to serve God alone. God wants us to help justice roll down like waters, and righteousness like an ever-flowing stream. God calls us to make a place for Jesus in our hearts and in our world, and to follow where he leads us. Let us serve the Lord!

Hymn

Choir

“Our God, Our Help in Ages Past” #210 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

Opening Prayer

Almighty God, to whom all hearts are open, all desires known, and from whom no secrets are hid: you alone know how often we have wandered from your ways, wasted your gifts, and forgotten your love. We have ignored the pain of the world, and looked away from the hungry, the poor, and the oppressed. In your mercy, cleanse the thoughts of our hearts and free us from all selfishness. Set us on the right path, that we may live in your light, and walk in your ways; through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.

Words of Assurance

Beloved in Christ: May the God of mercy free us from our burdens and strengthen us in all goodness, so that God may continue to fashion us into the people God created us to be. Our Creator cherishes us and invites us to new beginnings. Thanks be to God!  
Amen.

Old Testament Lesson Joshua 24:1-3a, 14-25

<sup>1</sup> Then Joshua gathered all the tribes of Israel to Shechem, and summoned the elders, the heads, the judges, and the officers of Israel; and they presented themselves before God. <sup>2</sup> And Joshua said to all the people, “Thus says the LORD, the God of Israel: Long

ago your ancestors—Terah and his sons Abraham and Nahor—lived beyond the Euphrates and served other gods. <sup>3</sup> Then I took your father Abraham from beyond the River and led him through all the land of Canaan and made his offspring many.

<sup>14</sup> “Now therefore revere the LORD, and serve him in sincerity and in faithfulness; put away the gods that your ancestors served beyond the River and in Egypt, and serve the LORD. <sup>15</sup> Now if you are unwilling to serve the LORD, choose this day whom you will serve, whether the gods your ancestors served in the region beyond the River or the gods of the Amorites in whose land you are living; but as for me and my household, we will serve the LORD.”

<sup>16</sup> Then the people answered, “Far be it from us that we should forsake the LORD to serve other gods; <sup>17</sup> for it is the LORD our God who brought us and our ancestors up from the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery, and who did those great signs in our sight. He protected us along all the way that we went, and among all the peoples through whom we passed; <sup>18</sup> and the LORD drove out before us all the peoples, the Amorites who lived in the land. Therefore we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God.”

<sup>19</sup> But Joshua said to the people, “You cannot serve the LORD, for he is a holy God. He is a jealous God; he will not forgive your transgressions or your sins. <sup>20</sup> If you forsake the LORD and serve foreign gods, then he will turn and do you harm, and consume you, after having done you good.” <sup>21</sup> And the people said to Joshua, “No, we will serve the LORD!” <sup>22</sup> Then Joshua said to the people, “You are witnesses against yourselves that you have chosen the LORD, to serve him.” And they said, “We are witnesses.” <sup>23</sup> He said, “Then put away the foreign gods that are among you, and incline your hearts to the LORD, the God of Israel.” <sup>24</sup> The people said to Joshua, “The LORD our God we will serve, and him we will obey.” <sup>25</sup> So Joshua made a covenant with the people that day, and made statutes and ordinances for them at Shechem.

### Kids' Time

*For those unable to see the video, the children's sermon is about Joshua becoming the leader of the Israelite people in the Promised Land. He reminded them not to start worshiping the gods of this foreign land, but to remember all that God had taught them in the desert. He said “As for me and my house, we will serve the Lord!” 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 our Bible stories that tell us the wonderful things you have done, and the ways you want us to live. Help us to follow you every day by being kind and helpful, and treating everyone as a friend, even if they are different from us. Thank you for our families that help us to know your love. We pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

### Gospel Lesson Matthew 25:1-13

<sup>1</sup> “Then the kingdom of heaven will be like this. Ten bridesmaids took their lamps and went to meet the bridegroom. <sup>2</sup> Five of them were foolish, and five were wise. <sup>3</sup> When the foolish took their lamps, they took no oil with them; <sup>4</sup> but the wise took flasks of oil with their lamps. <sup>5</sup> As the bridegroom was delayed, all of them became drowsy and slept. <sup>6</sup> But at midnight there was a shout, ‘Look! Here is the bridegroom! Come out to

meet him.’<sup>7</sup> Then all those bridesmaids got up and trimmed their lamps.<sup>8</sup> The foolish said to the wise, ‘Give us some of your oil, for our lamps are going out.’<sup>9</sup> But the wise replied, ‘No! there will not be enough for you and for us; you had better go to the dealers and buy some for yourselves.’<sup>10</sup> And while they went to buy it, the bridegroom came, and those who were ready went with him into the wedding banquet; and the door was shut.<sup>11</sup> Later the other bridesmaids came also, saying, ‘Lord, lord, open to us.’<sup>12</sup> But he replied, ‘Truly I tell you, I do not know you.’<sup>13</sup> Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour.

### Sermon

Today’s parable of the wise and foolish young women is difficult. As we read it, there are a lot of questions that come to mind. The most common one may be: where is the good news for the five who come back at the end and find the door is closed and will not be reopened for them?

Some preachers focus on that and deliver a sermon whose message is meant to scare us into right living, something like: “If Jesus came back today, would you want him to find you. . .”—here you fill in the blank with some less-than-desirable activity. Would you want Jesus to come back and find you cheating on your tax return, telling an off-color joke, watching porn on the internet, flipping off the driver next to you, passed out on the floor from having too much to drink, letting loose on social media calling someone everything but a child of God, and so on.

This is certainly a valid message – I think we too often live our lives as though God cannot see what we are doing, presuming on God’s grace so that we fool ourselves into thinking we can do whatever we want and God will, in the end, simply forgive us. The closed door at the end of this parable reminds us that even though we serve a God of grace, God does have expectations of us. This is what Joshua was talking about in the Old Testament lesson. He asks the people if they want to serve God – they have a choice; they can serve this God or some other god or no god. They say they want to serve God of Israel, but Joshua warns them: if they do, they will have to do what God tells them to do. And it might not always be easy – which takes us back to the closed door in the parable.

None of us wants to believe the door cannot be opened when we show up late. But I have had it happen plenty of times in my own life – when the door of the plane is closed, they will not reopen it no matter how much you stand there and plead. If you get to the ship and gangway is pulled up, they will not put it down again. When you get to the store five minutes after they close, they do not re-open the door. The times are posted, and if you get there late, the door is locked. God has told us what is expected of us – feed the hungry, clothe the naked, visit those who cannot get out, have compassion on widows and orphans, and foreigners (both those from different countries and those with different religions). We get chances every day to do those things. But when the day is over, we cannot get the time back. Either we did what God asked us to do, or we did not.

Since this is a parable, there are other messages, too. This story is also about those who are prepared and those who are not prepared –to remind us that our relationship to God does not depend on us; it depends on God.

We have come to worship this day, not as a noble act on our part, but because our loving, active God has first, in Jesus Christ, come to us. God came to some of us early in our life, when we were still children. God came to others of us later in life; for some of us, perhaps, God has come only recently. Yet, God has come and placed us in God's family, and called us to serve God's kingdom, and God gives us what we need to be faithful. <sup>[1]</sup>

The living God often sweeps into our life, when we least expect it, just like that bridegroom who finally showed up so late at night. Even if God may seem distant to you at this moment, be assured that God will come, and that God will come to you.

In the book, *Lest Innocent Blood Be Shed*, Phillip Hallie tells the story of a small protestant town in southern France called Le Chambon. The village of Le Chambon is unusual in that they hid Jewish children and adults from the Nazis during World War II. The villagers devised many strategies to save these Jewish people from deportation. <sup>[2]</sup>

One old lady had a Jewish family hidden under her chicken house. When the Nazis came to her house, she faked a heart attack to distract them. Later, she was asked why she did this, and she replied, "On the Sunday that the Germans came to our town, the pastor had said in his sermon, 'One day Jesus will come into your life and ask you to do something just for him.' Well, everybody in the congregation knew what we had to do. We were prepared for it." <sup>[3]</sup>

The message of the parable may seem like a warning: "Be prepared. At any time, maybe in the dead of night, when it is very dark and you have difficulty seeing your way, just when you least expect it, the Lord of the Banquet arrives, and then there will be a test for you. And it will be revealed whether you are prepared to respond to him, to serve him or not." <sup>[4]</sup>

But maybe this message is not so much a warning, but very good news. Because embedded in it is a gracious promise: Though today you may be frustrated with the inactivity of God in your life - be patient. The Lord promises to come to you. Though you may be tired of waiting; though you may have earnestly prayed for the living God to be present to you in a vital, undeniably real way; though you may be uncertain just what God wants you to do in your life - take heart. For God does have work for you to do and will eventually call upon you to do it. <sup>[5]</sup>

By our human standards, God may be moving too slowly. When we are in a time of difficulty, any amount of waiting seems too long. When our child is sick or missing, when our relationship is crumbling, when we are trying to kick a bad habit once and for all, when we are waiting for test results or recovering from surgery, and, of course now, when we are waiting for relief from this pandemic and for election results, when we think we cannot hold on for one more day and just wish everything would go back to normal - remember, our God is a living God. <sup>[6]</sup>

Our God is a god who keeps promises. And God has promised to come to you and to me. Maybe, when we find ourselves in a dark place, it will be in the middle of the night, when it is darkest of all, that God comes to us. <sup>[7]</sup>

One last thought: this parable is also about patience - a virtue that is largely neglected in our time. Some of us are suffering so much in this pandemic because we lost the skill of being patient; after all, we live in a 24/7 world where everything is at our fingertips, any time of the day or night. But if we desire to have a real and faithful relationship with God, then we will need to practice patience. Because God just does

not seem to work on our schedule. Our faith tells us that God gives us gifts and shows us grace, and answers our prayers. But rarely does God do these things instantly, at our demand.

And yet, over the course of time, our faith proves again and again that God does come, and God does minister to each of us.

This parable is a caution and a promise. It tells us to be patient. At a time when you least expect it, God will arrive, ready to engage you, ready to be engaged by you. Will you be ready when God comes to you?

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

### Song

Choir

“Keep Your Lamps!”

### Pastoral Prayer

O God, we come to you in prayer and remember the many blessings that we enjoy in this life. As we prepare for Veterans Day this week, we give thanks for our freedom, and we remember all those who lost their lives to give us that freedom. We remember those in our faith, and those in our families. We give our gratitude, respect, and admiration to those who have served our country with honor.

On this day we pray that you will help us to change the world into the place you intend it to be. We pray that peace may become a lasting reality. We pray for our leaders, and for leaders around the world, that they may act with your wisdom and your care for others.

Help us, O God, to notice those who remain hidden – those who are ashamed to show themselves, those who have been made to feel unimportant, those who are left unwanted, unknown, and unloved. Enliven us with your passion and compassion, that we might walk in your ways, seeking your truth, comforting the sick and hurting and lonely among us, supporting one another in our needs, and learning from each other what it means to be your children.

Help us to live with boldness and strength; fill us with courage and hope; guide our steps to follow in the way of Jesus Christ. 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

“Blessed Assurance, Jesus Is Mine!” #341 in the Presbyterian Hymnal

### Offering

We live God's vision when we give with an attitude of joy and thanksgiving. Remember the words of scripture: Do good, and share what you have with others, for these are the sacrifices that are pleasing to God (Heb.13:16).

*We give thanks for our many gifts. Churches depend on the generosity of members and friends to support their ministries. 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 be able to connect to one another 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 God, all creatures here below;  
Praise God above, you heavenly host;  
Creator, Christ, and Holy Ghost.

Benediction and Blessing

Beloved in Christ, long ago, Joshua challenged the people of God, saying, “Serve God in sincerity and truth,” and put away everything else that promises safety or fulfillment or comfort; “choose for yourselves this day whom you will serve.” Let us go forth, choosing to be children of God, to be disciples of Christ, following in God’s way and sharing God’s love. Go with the blessing of God, 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

<sup>[1]</sup> Several paragraphs of this sermon are based on a reflection by the Rev. Michael A. Turner in “Pulpit Resource,” vol. 36, no. 4, for November 9, 2008, pp. 25-28.

<sup>[2]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[3]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[4]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[5]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[6]</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>[7]</sup> *ibid.*