

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan
Advent Series, 2020
Hello, My Name is... Mighty God
Sunday, December 6, 2020
Ashley Smith Ashley

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell

Good morning! Welcome to our worship on this December 6th. We are so delighted that you have joined us. Today is a day of celebration and great joy within our church family, because this Sunday is our very first Sunday with officially having Ashley Smith Ashley here serving as our Associate Pastor. Ashley actually began work with us just this week on December 1st and we are thrilled that she and her husband Brendan have joined our church family. Today you are in for a treat because Ashley is preaching, and we look forward to hearing from her later today.

It is a joy, as well, to be able to gather together for a Christmas carol celebration, taking place on Sunday, December 13th, here in our church parking lot. There's an opportunity for you to register your vehicles on our church's website and if you join us at 5:00 p.m. on Sunday, December 13th, what you'll hear is our chancel choir outside, socially distanced with masks, singing, that will be broadcast through your car radios into your car. You have the opportunity within your car, without masks, to sing along at the top of your lungs. We are thrilled, as you come into the parking lot, to be able to offer you hot chocolate and Christmas cookies that you can take in your vehicle and you can enjoy while we sing some of our favorite Christmas carols together. I appreciate, friends, that this is an untraditional approach to singing our Christmas carols together, but this is an untraditional year, and we trust that God's Holy Spirit will unite our hearts in praise as we join together for that special night.

Additionally, friends, today is a special day, in a day of joy, because as one family of faith we gather together to celebrate communion today. It's wonderful that on Ashley's first Sunday we are indeed gathered around the table as one family, although in separate houses, sharing this communion meal. As a reminder to you today, now might be a very good time for you to pause your video and gather communion elements from your own kitchen. Whatever you have works, bread, bagels, juice. Amazingly God can make these ordinary items within our kitchens signs of his love and grace. So please go ahead and gather those now so you're ready to join us later in the service.

(Pause to gather communion elements).

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell – Announcement of Lighting of Advent Candel

Friends, it is with joy today that we begin this service with the lighting of our second advent candle, as this is the second week of advent. Stu and Sandy Dodge are here as members of our church family to light today's candle which represents joy for us. Following our advent candle lighting we will be led in worship by the bells, who will play for us, "Oh Come All Ye Faithful".

Stu and Sandy Dodge – Lighting of Advent Candles

Friends, as this is the second Sunday in Advent, we light our first two Advent candles. Our first candle reminds us that Jesus Christ is our hope. Our second Advent candle reminds us that Jesus Christ is also our source of joy. Listen now to God's promise of joy from Isaiah, Chapter 9:

“The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of deep darkness a light has dawned. You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy.”

“For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God.”

Today in worship we will explore the joy that comes from knowledge that we have a mighty God contending for us.

Let us pray. Loving God, today we celebrate your gift with joy. We thank you that in the person of Jesus Christ we have a mighty God who fights for us, and fights through all darkness to lead us home to you. Please receive our praise today. Amen.

Rev. Mark Hovermale – Opening Prayer

Let us pray. Come, now is the time to worship, just as you are, before our mighty God, come. We praise you, Lord, for Ashley joining our staff officially this week. You indeed are a mighty God and we celebrate you this morning. Amen.

Ashley S. Ashley – Scripture Readings

Our first scripture reading this morning is from Psalm 33:

- 1 Sing joyfully to the LORD, you righteous;
it is fitting for the upright to praise him.
- 2 Praise the LORD with the harp;
make music to him on the ten-stringed lyre.
- 3 Sing to him a new song;
play skillfully, and shout for joy.
- 4 For the word of the LORD is right and true;
he is faithful in all he does.
- 5 The LORD loves righteousness and justice;
the earth is full of his unfailing love.
- 6 By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.
- 7 He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.
- 8 Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the people of the world revere him.
- 9 For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.
- 10 The LORD foils the plans of the nations;
he thwarts the purposes of the peoples.

¹¹ But the plans of the LORD stand firm forever,
the purposes of his heart through all generations.

¹² Blessed is the nation whose God is the LORD,
the people he chose for his inheritance.

¹³ From heaven the LORD looks down
and sees all mankind;

¹⁴ from his dwelling place he watches
all who live on earth—

¹⁵ he who forms the hearts of all,
who considers everything they do.

¹⁶ No king is saved by the size of his army;
no warrior escapes by his great strength.

¹⁷ A horse is a vain hope for deliverance;
despite all its great strength it cannot save.

¹⁸ But the eyes of the LORD are on those who fear him,
on those whose hope is in his unfailing love,

¹⁹ to deliver them from death
and keep them alive in famine.

²⁰ We wait in hope for the LORD;
he is our help and our shield.

²¹ In him our hearts rejoice,
for we trust in his holy name.

²² May your unfailing love be with us, LORD,
even as we put our hope in you.

Our second scripture passage for this morning comes from the gospel according to Luke, chapter 1, verses 46 through 55.

And Mary said: “My soul glorifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant.
From now on all generations will call me blessed,
for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name.

His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation.
He has performed mighty deeds with his arm;
he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts.
He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble.
He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty.
He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful
to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors.”

Friends, this is the word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Ashley S. Ashley — Sermon

Let us pray. Lord, open our hearts and minds by the power of your Holy Spirit, so as your scriptures are read and your word is proclaimed, we might hear with joy what you have to say to us today. Amen.

Brendan and I are at a time in our lives when a lot of people in our close inner circle are having babies. It's certainly an exciting time to witness! In fact, within the last 18 months two of our best friends and Brendan's little sister have all had their very first child. It's so fun to watch them with their new babies, to hear the coos and the cries and to watch the bond that is forming between parents and child. It makes it hard to believe that the friends that we goofed around with in college and the little girl that I met when Brendan and I first started dating are now responsible for new human life.

In the midst of this, I discovered a second really great joy as my loved ones have become parents, and that's the joy of listening to them name their babies and dream about the person that their child will grow to become. One friend recently named his baby after his late father, a gentle, compassionate, talented, adventurous man who loved God. And while his son is sure to develop his own personality and gifts, I have no doubt that there is hope, that in naming him after such a man as this, he will come to embody some of these same characteristics.

Our sermon series theme is from the passage of Isaiah 9:6, where we are introduced to the names often associated with the baby Jesus: Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. These names hold all the hope and dreams of all the Jewish people, and they reflect the attributes that the future Messiah was expected and hoped to embody.

This morning we will pay particular attention to the second name in that list: Mighty God. I invite you to think back for a minute on some of your favorite Sunday school stories like the creation account or the burning bush. Scripture is filled with examples of God exhibiting sovereignty, authority, and might. Psalm 33 summarizes many of these awesome acts in a poetic description of God's great power. In verses 6 through 9 we are reminded of God's command over all living things.

⁶By the word of the LORD the heavens were made,
their starry host by the breath of his mouth.

⁷He gathers the waters of the sea into jars;
he puts the deep into storehouses.

⁸Let all the earth fear the LORD;
let all the people of the world revere him.

⁹For he spoke, and it came to be;
he commanded, and it stood firm.

For those of us who are familiar with scripture it can be easy to gloss over these words and miss the notes of adoration and praise that the Psalmist is bringing to our attention. God is the Lord of the world, creator of heaven and earth. Both are the result of God's command. Formed only by God's word and breath, to dwell in this world is to live and move in the realm that God repeatedly wills into being.

I have three stories from my time in college that I can point to as defining moments in both my theological education and my own personal faith. One of those stories relates to how I came to understand the great might of God. It was 8:00 a.m. in the morning, which for many college students translates to way, way too early, and judging from the combination of sweatshirts and beanies and messy buns, the class, including myself, was really tired. Per usual, our professor asked us to join him in reciting Deuteronomy 6:4, also known as "The Shema", which we repeated together as a form of opening prayer.

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One."

However on this particular morning most of us barely looked up as we mumbled our way through the familiar verse. As we finished, our typically jovial professor stared us down with a rather intimidating scowl. "Say it again," he demanded. Many of us sat up a little bit straighter in our chairs as we repeated the line. "Stand up! Say it again, louder," he practically yelled this time. We scrambled out of our seats. As we stood, we repeated the words, this time with a little bit more force. "One more time! Come on! Say it like you mean it!" So standing like soldiers at attention, we proclaimed

"Hear, O Israel: the LORD is our God, the LORD is One."

Our professor stared at us for what felt like forever before he softly but seriously responded. "Every day you wake up is because God has ordained it. Every breath you breathe is because God has allowed it. Every single moment of your existence is because God wills it. Never forget that your life, all of your life, is a gift from God. Never assume that you do any of this on your own. Never pass up an opportunity to thank God for God's goodness, love, and mercy."

You can bet that morning we all paid particular attention to the scriptures that we were studying in my Psalm class! Friends, we are to pay attention to God and to stand in awe of God. Psalm 33 declares that God is the sole sovereign of every sphere of reality, the world, nations, humanity, and the community of faith. This greatness, power and might could be intimidating, even scary. After all, if this is a God that wills us into existence, what's stopping this God from willing us out of it? Thankfully, God doesn't use this power flippantly, to do whatever God wants, whenever God wants it. Instead, God uses this power to bring about God's holy will and what exactly does this will look like?

Well, let us return to Psalm 33, verses 8 through 20, to help us understand God's motivation to act. "Behold the eye of the Lord is on those who fear him, on those who hope in his steadfast love, that he may deliver their soul from death and keep them alive in famine. Our soul waits for the Lord; He is our help and our shield."

God uses this power to care for those who acknowledge God as Lord, and have received the gift of grace. We see God's power at work in this life when we face hardships and uncertainty. God acts as our help and our shield, the one who stays by our side, shares the weight of our pain and encourages us to always press on. And, of course, we see God's power at work in the promise of life to come. We no longer fear death because of Christ's victory on the cross. We now have eternal reassurance that we are welcomed and embraced as God's very own children, thanks be to God. Truly, God's power and God's might deserve to be praised. It's no wonder that the Psalmist begins this passage with the command to shout for joy, as verses 1 through 3 suggest. This is good news, and that should move us to dance, to yell, to sing, to play the harp, or the lyre, whatever that is, or to grab what other instrument that we have.

This good news must be expressed with joy and considering that we are now in Advent, one biblical figure immediately comes to mind when I think of someone shouting and singing when they've encountered the true greatness of God. That person is Mary, the mother of Jesus. In Luke, chapter 1, upon learning from the Angel Gabriel that she is pregnant with the son of God, Mary travels to see her relative Elizabeth, who immediately erupts into praise for all the good works that God is clearly doing through Mary.

Pause and imagine with me for a minute what it must have been like to be Mary, a young woman pregnant with a baby that does not biologically belong to her fiancé. She was just visited by an angel! Let me repeat that she was visited by an angel, an angel that told her that she would soon give birth to the long-awaited Messiah. She then rushes to see Elizabeth and before she can explain all that is happening, even get out more than a mere “hello,” Elizabeth exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb.”

Friends, I'll be honest for a minute. If I were Mary, I think I would have burst into tears. This is a lot to process. How easy would it have been to allow fear to creep in, to wonder why she was chosen to bear this weight of responsibility, or to worry about how the future might come to pass. But, instead, Mary responds with what has famously become known as the Magnificat, or Mary's Song of Praise. She begins her joyful hymn by declaring that, “My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God, my Savior.” Some scholars believe that the dual use of soul and spirit here suggests that Mary is praising God with her whole being. I can picture her with arms thrown open wide or hands pressed against her chest, as her tear-filled eyes look to heaven, as she joyfully exclaims with laughter all that is to come. She does not fear God or God's will because she knows God. Mary knows that God's power displays God's goodness.

As A. W. Tozer observed, “The greatness of God rouses fear within us, but his goodness encourages us to not be afraid of him.” To fear and not be afraid, that is the paradox of faith. In verse 49 she calls God the mighty one. Perhaps in this moment she is recalling scripture passages like Psalm 33, remembering the story she's been told of how God has acted on behalf of God's people. Mary knows that God is powerful, but more importantly she knows that any demonstration of God's power is not merely a show of force but is intended to remind God's people that they belong to God, that they can trust God for help. Although faced with quite an unknown future, Mary adopts a posture of joy, and joy that is fueled by the knowledge that God is with her in the same way that God was with all those who came before her, and the same way that God will be with all those who come after her.

Friends, we are those who come after Mary. We sit here in the first week of the last month of 2020, looking out upon an unknown holiday season and a questionable new year. I want to encourage us to be like Mary and face our futures with joy, but I also want to acknowledge that sometimes this simply doesn't happen. Sometimes fear or doubt do creep in before we can stop them, but that doesn't mean that joy has to elude us entirely.

This past week, a friend of mine shared a story about his son's experience decorating for Christmas. Every year the family alternates which child gets to place the star on top of the tree, and this year it was the youngest son's turn. He was so excited for this chance but there was just one tiny problem. He's terrified of heights. As he climbed on his dad's shoulders, he could be heard mumbling, “I'm just so scared! I'm just so scared! Oh, I'm so scared.” But then he paused, he took a breath and said to himself, but much more confidently this time, “Dad's never dropped me before. I'm sure he won't start now.”

After the star was carefully placed on the tree, the young boy sat back beaming. “Wow, Dad, I knew I could trust you! Look at what we have done together!” In a moment when we find ourselves facing hard things and other emotions threaten to spring up, I invite us to pause, to take a breath, take a moment and remember that the mighty one is the one holding us up. In the days and weeks to come, let us remember that God is awesome, powerful, and sovereign, that God is Lord, Savior and Mighty One. Let us remember that

this Mighty One came to earth as a baby in order to draw us into God's steadfast love forever. May these truths allow us to be more like Mary and adopt a posture of joy, a joy so vast and so vivid, that we can't help but declare with all our soul and spirit, "Wow, look what God is doing and look what God is inviting me into. Thanks be to God. Amen.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Prayers of the People and Sacrament of Communion

Friends, it is with joy that we come to this table today. We come because we love God a little and wish to love God more. Let us share this meal together. Let us first come into God's holy presence in prayer. Would you all please join me.

Gracious and loving God, we come into your holy presence today, grateful for your power, grateful for your peace, grateful for your holy purposes at work in our lives, and in your world. Lead us this day, we pray, into your hope and into your resources of joy. We thank you, dear God, for the hope that lights up the darkness, for the joy that sustains us through all types of challenges. Hear us now as we pray today for your hope and joy to be realized in the hearts of all who are sick and in the hearts of those who suffer from loneliness or grief. We do pray, dear God, for an end to this pandemic. We pray that a vaccine would indeed prove fruitful and would become available. We pray for all medical personnel who continue to fight this virus on the frontline. Sustain them by your grace, we pray. We do pray, dear God, that your hope and peace would break into every heart throughout this Christmas season. Help us, even through all that is unfamiliar, to find you, Lord. We thank you for your faithfulness, we thank you for your hope. We thank you today for your joy that we can lean into in times like this. Strengthen us in your grace so that we would shine your light and live for your glory. This we pray in the strong name of Jesus Christ, the light of the world, who taught us to pray together saying, 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.

Friends, on the night that he was betrayed our Lord Jesus Christ took bread and after he gave thanks to God, his father, he broke it saying, "This is my body that has been broken for you. Do this in memory of me." In the same way, after supper Jesus took the cup and said, "This cup is the new covenant sealed by my blood. Whenever you drink from it, do so remembering me, for as often as you eat this bread and drink from this cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until he comes again." Friends, these are the gifts of God, given to the people of God. Let us now share this meal together.

Rev. Emily Riley Campbell — Closing Prayer

Would you all please play with me. Gracious and loving God, we thank you for the way that you have fed us from your bounty today. Thank you for feeding us with joy, with peace, with hope and with love. We pray as we go from your table today that we would go out and share these, your gifts, with the entire world. Please bless us so that we can be a blessing to others. This we pray in Jesus' name. Amen.

Ashley S. Ashley — Charge and Blessing

Now our charge and benediction:

Friends, as you move throughout your week, remember that the one who holds the season, all of creation, is the same mighty God that is holding you, the one who calls you

beloved. Embody this good news and face each new day with joy. Allow your soul and spirit to magnify the Lord.

And may the Lord bless you and keep you. May the Lord make his face to shine upon you and be gracious to you, and the Lord lift up his countenance upon you and forever give you peace. Amen.