

First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth, Michigan

Hello, My Name Is... Child of God

Sunday, December 27, 2020

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor – Welcome & Announcements

Good morning, everyone, and Merry Christmas! Welcome to the worship of God at First Presbyterian Church of Plymouth.

Today is Sunday, December 27th, the last Sunday of 2020. I am excited to be with you all and to welcome you to worship this first Sunday after Christmas. We know that festivities look a little bit different this year and you might not be celebrating in the ways that you are accustomed to. My hope is that our Christmas services and this one this morning bring a little bit of joy and Christmas cheer to your day and to the year as a whole, because it is with great joy, we proclaim that Christ is born. Hallelujah and amen!

I want to give a special thanks this morning to Darlene Maginley and Juliana Evans for helping me with worship, and, of course, to all of those who provided music for this morning, including Clare Davidson, Geff Phillips, and our Chancel Choir, led by the direction of Dr. Jerry Smith. Of course, we continue to be thankful to Susan Underhill for all of her work in getting our services recorded and posted online, so we can enjoy them together, virtually, as a church family.

I have one other announcement to share with you all today. Next Sunday, January 3rd, we will be celebrating Epiphany or Star Sunday and communion. We will have our services both online and in our church parking lot. The service in the parking lot will start at 10:00 a.m. If you're hoping to attend worship from the safety of your car, we would invite you to pre-register in advance online so that we can make all the arrangements and plan to welcome you. Friends, it is always good to gather together. It is a blessing when we have an opportunity to give thanks to God and worship him in all of the different ways that we are able, so I invite you now to continue with us in worship as Darlene leads us in our opening prayer.

Darlene Maginley, Director of Children's Ministry – Opening Prayer

Dear heavenly Father, we thank you for the excitement and anticipation that we experienced as we prepared for the coming of your Son. Help us to remember that anticipation each day as we greet the morning and help us to prepare our hearts anew each day to all of the gifts that you have given to us. Blessed Christ our Savior, we thank you for the joy that greeted us on Christmas morning as we celebrated your coming. We thank you for our friends and families that are earthly examples of the heavenly love that you came to share. We thank you also for the earthly gifts that you have given us to experience and enjoy in the noon time of our lives. Most especially, we thank you for the gift of yourself that you gave us, so that we can have a greater eternal life in your holy presence, and for the blessed Holy Spirit. We thank you for the peace that your indwelling brings to our hearts, a peace so deep that the troubles and cares of this world cannot dislodge it or belittle it, the peace that comes with our certainty of the truth of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. We thank you for this peace that allows

us to close our eyes at night and rest in the anticipation of the joy and peace of our eternal life, praising your name with hallelujahs. In the name of the Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Juliana Evans – Scripture Reading

Isaiah 9:6

For a child has been born for us,
a son given to us;
authority rests upon his shoulders;
and he is named
Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God,
Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

Luke 2:8-20

⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹To you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger.” ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying,

¹⁴“Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!”

¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, “Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us.” ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

[Geff Phillips sings “Away in a Manger”]

Darlene Maginley, Director of Children’s Ministry – Reading the children’s story:

**“Room for a Little One: A Christmas Tale,”
by Martin Waddell and Jason Cockcroft**

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor – Sermon

Let us pray. Gracious and living God, we ask that you would be with us, as your scriptures have been read and as we prepare to hear your word proclaimed, that we might listen with joy to all that you have to say to us today. Amen.

Over the past several weeks our Advent study has focused on Isaiah, chapter 9, verse 6, and the different names that we attribute to Jesus. First we learned that Jesus is a Wonderful Counselor, a title which reminds us that Jesus is a trustworthy and wise King who oversees all of the past, present, and future. Next we learned that Jesus is a Mighty God, one who holds power over all of creation and chooses to use that power to care for God's people. Then we learned that Jesus is the Everlasting Father. He invites us to bring our honest feelings before God and teaches us to be receptive to the creative ways that God is loving and moving in our community. Finally, we learned that Jesus is the Prince of Peace, the one who will rule with justice and righteousness as a priority.

Today, I'd like to add one final title to our list, one that you're not going to find in Isaiah, but I think you'll be familiar with. It's one that takes Jesus the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace, and Everlasting Father and places him in a manger in Bethlehem. First, take some time today to consider what it means that we call Jesus the Son of God.

The phrase "Son of God" is used forty-seven times throughout the New Testament and, not surprisingly, the majority of them come from the Gospels. Although it is used in a variety of ways, the most significant use of the title speaks directly to Jesus' divinity. For example, when Jesus' disciples saw him walk on water and calm the storm (in Matthew, chapter 14), they praised him, saying, "Truly you are the son of God." In Jesus' command of the wind and the waves, the disciples saw the one who has power over all of creation.

Another example can be found in Matthew, chapter 28 when Jesus stood before the high priest preceding his crucifixion. The elders asked him directly if he was the Messiah, the Son of God, to which Jesus simply replied, "You have said so." Hearing his response, the high priest tore his robes and declared that Jesus had blasphemed, because as far as this council was concerned, Jesus' claiming the title, "Son of God" was no different than claiming to *be* God.

Throughout the Gospel accounts we not only see Jesus responding to this title but living into it, as well. Traveling from place-to-place, Jesus preaches the good news of the fast-approaching Kingdom of God and prioritizes the Father's will above everything else, including his very own life. Scripture attests time and again that Jesus was not simply a faithful rabbi, a chosen Messiah, or a long awaited descendent of David, but Jesus was, is, and will forever be, God Incarnate, all of God *and* living, breathing, laughing, crying, growing, aching human flesh. God with us! This incredible revelation leads us to ask the question of why? Why would God send God's self as the Son, as Jesus, to be with us?

We find the answer in what was probably one of the first verses that many of us learned in church. John 3:16 says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only son, so that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." God's desire from the very beginning has always been the same--to be with us. We see this truth when God walked with Adam and Eve in the garden. We hear it in the prophets, urging constantly for the people of Israel to repent and turn back to God. And then we are invited to experience this in the person of Jesus, to bear witness to His birth, His life, death, resurrection and ascension. To accept the gift of salvation that he offers to us, and to believe that the Son of God was sent into the world and ordered to make all of us children of God, this is exactly the good news that we celebrate each and every Christmas.

To know God does not only love *some*, but God loves *all*, we take a look at the Gospel of Luke, chapter 2. It is interesting to note that while only two verses focus on the actual

birth of Jesus, twelve verses are used to describe the angelic announcement and the response of the shepherds to the news of this new King. Some theologians suggest that Luke purposely does this in order to emphasize the significance of this event for *all* people.

It was customary in the Roman Empire for poets and others to declare peace and prosperity at the birth of the one who would soon become emperor. It certainly makes sense that for the King of Kings, the Lord of Lords, a joyous angelic chorus would announce his birth. What makes less sense is *where* this announcement takes place and to whom it is announced. The proclamation is not made in gloriously adorned palace halls, but in a field, nor is it made to rulers, politicians, or anyone with great power or influence. Instead, in verse 8, we learn that the first to hear about the newborn King are local shepherds.

Shepherding was a common profession, but it wasn't a particularly desirable one. It was dirty and hard work. One historian suggests that the shepherd simply stood for the average Judean; today, quite literally, the person stuck working the night shift. It is to these people, the ones who are often forgotten, left outside, looked down upon, the ones viewed as outsiders or simpletons, these are the ones God chooses to share this most glorious news with first! God could have sent those angels to anyone, but I think that God chose to announce to the shepherds because God wanted to show that this was truly good news for everyone, even those that others might tend to forget or deem unimportant, or "little."

In our children's book reading this morning, it was the little ones who were first given the chance to welcome Jesus at the manger. I think the author's depictions of these little ones is quite spot on—old, stray, small, and tired. How often do we use these, and words like them, to depict someone that we view as worthless? How often do we use these words to describe *ourselves* when we feel worthless?

The Son of God came to earth in order to make all of us children of God, but the Son knows us well. He knows how often many of us simply do not feel worthy of this grace, how often we self-identify as the one who is old, stray, tired, forgotten, average, unimportant and lowly. So in knowing all of this, the Son of God stepped down from the greatness of heaven and became a little one himself. He took all of his authority and power and placed it in a human body, one that is capable of crouching down and meeting us at eye level, in order to say with all the confidence of the whole universe, you, yes you, absolutely you, you are my beloved child and I love you!

Friends, Christmas is a reminder of the great lengths that God goes to, in order to be with all of us. When faced with the depth of this kind of love, it can be hard to know how to respond, but thankfully our shepherd friends proved to be excellent examples. Verses 16 to 20 tell us that upon receiving the good news from the angels, the shepherds went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in the manger. When they saw this, they made known what had been told to them about this child, and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. Then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen.

Scripture doesn't exactly say *how* the shepherds shared this news with others. Instead, the passage emphasizes their energy and their passion. They went with haste, they made sure to share the good news in ways that amazed anyone who had listened, and they glorified and praised God while doing it!

For as long as I can remember “The Little Drummer Boy” has been one of my favorite Christmas songs. In it, a child comes to visit the baby Jesus, but realizes that he doesn't have a fine gift to bring. Instead he plays for Jesus on his drum. In one of my favorite renditions, the song simply ends recounting how Jesus responds, “Then he smiled at me, just me and my drum!”

The shepherds, like the little drummer boy, may not have had a lot to give as an offering or a response to learning that the Son of God had come, but what they did have was their joy, their excitement, their hope, and their enthusiasm, their willingness to worship, and of course to proclaim. And it is exactly this passionate response that has been recorded for us in scripture.

Friends, let us enter into a new year with a fuller appreciation for who Jesus is. Let us recall with joy and gladness that Jesus is the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace and Son of God--the one who came to earth as a little one so that all people, big and small, could become children of God. Let the good news of this great love move us to share this truth passionately and enthusiastically with all those around us, in any way that we can imagine or think to share it. Amen.

[Chancel Choir sings “One Small Child”]

Ashley Smith Ashley – Prayers of the People

Almighty God you wonderfully created us in your image, and yet even more wonderfully, you restored us to that image, even after we have attempted to break it so many times. We praise you for your Son Jesus who willingly took on human flesh so that we could experience the fullness of God in person. On the days when we feel small or insignificant, may we remember that we are called beloved children of God. Remind us each and every day of the depths of your love and the extent of your grace.

This morning we give thanks to you for all of your children. We pray for those who are sick, for those who are suffering, and for those who are feeling alone. Wrap your arms around them, oh God, that they might know your peace, bring people into their lives to serve as representatives of your care and presence. We lift up those who are hungry, who suffer from any injustice or violence. Move into our hearts so that we might care for our sisters and brothers. Break down the barriers that divide us so that we may truly be united together as the body of Christ. In your mercy, draw all of us up into your arms that we can share in the divine life of Jesus Christ, who came to share our humanity so that we could be with you for eternity. You have shared upon us the holy light of your Son. May this light enkindle in our hearts and shine forth in our lives. We ask all of this in the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and Savior 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.

Ashley Smith Ashley, Associate Pastor – Benediction and Blessing

Friends, as you head out into your week may you remember that you have received the ultimate gift--the love of Jesus Christ. Know that Jesus came as a little one in order to invite you into God's family, that you could become a child of God. Go out into the world proclaiming with joy all of this good news! Be like the shepherds and share it with anyone who will listen.

I invite you now to hear this blessing: May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, the love of God, and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with you now and always. Amen.