

**The Green Hill Presbyterian Church**  
**Sunday, January 4, 2025 – Table Copy**

**SILENT PREPARATION**

Eternal God, by the light of a star you led magi to the worship of your Son. Guide us by your light, that we may show others your glory; though Jesus Christ our Lord, who lives and reigns with you and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

**PRAYER OF INVOCATION (*Unison*)**

From near and far, we come to worship. Amid our joys and sorrows, we come to praise. In our strength and in our weakness, we gather for refreshment and renewal. You have called us together like a shepherd keeps a flock. As a gardener waters growing plants, you care for us, and provide for our growth. Praise be to you, O God, for your protecting love and freeing grace. Shine upon us here, that we may know your truth and receive it into our lives; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**PRAYER FOR ILLUMINATION**

Most Gracious God, in whose love we are chosen and blessed: Let your Word become flesh once more – as we embrace the light of Jesus Christ in our walk, and in our talk. Strengthen both our belief and our testimony, that our lives may become an invitation to others – to join your family of truth, grace, and justice; for the sake of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

**FIRST READING**

John 1:1-4, 10-14

*Our first reading is selected verses from the Prologue of John's Gospel. In it, John describes the person and power of Jesus – the Word made flesh – and the choice his Incarnation presents to humanity....*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,  
and the Word was God.

He was in the beginning with God.

All things came into being through him,  
and without him not one thing came into being.

What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people.  
He was in the world, and the world came into being through him, yet  
the world did not know him.

He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him.

But to all who received him, who believed in his name,

he gave power to become children of God,

who were born,

not of blood or of the will of the flesh or of the will of man, but of God.

And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory,  
the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.  
No one has ever seen God. It is the only Son, himself God,  
who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

**SECOND READING**

Ephesians 1:3-14

*After a two-verse salutation,*

*the Letter to the Ephesians launches into an exuberant benediction,  
recounting God's multiple blessings --  
mediated through Christ....*

Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in Christ -- with every spiritual blessing --  
in the heavenly places,  
just as he chose us in Christ -- before the foundation of the world --  
to be holy and blameless before him in love.  
He destined us for adoption as his children through Jesus Christ,  
according to the good pleasure of his will,  
to the praise of his glorious grace,  
that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.  
In him we have redemption through his blood,  
the forgiveness of our trespasses,  
according to the riches of his grace -- that he lavished on us.  
With all wisdom and insight, he has made known to us the mystery of his will --  
according to his good pleasure -- that he set forth in Christ,  
as a plan for the fullness of time,  
to gather up all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth.  
In Christ, we have also obtained an inheritance,  
having been destined according to the purpose of him --  
who accomplishes all things, according to his counsel, and will --  
so that we, who were the first to set our hope on Christ,  
might live for the praise of his glory.  
In him you also -- when you had heard the word of truth --  
the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him --  
were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit;  
this is the pledge of our inheritance --  
toward redemption as God's own people --  
to the praise of his glory.

SERMON

“Resolutions...or Revolution?!”

Missionary James King recalls the true story –  
of an African woman in one of his churches.

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This woman attended every service –  
accompanied by an old, mongrel dog.

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The dog would enter with the lady – and sit beside her during the service –  
always on an outside seat, beside the aisle.

Then – at the conclusion of the service –  
the woman would always come – and kneel at the altar – for prayer,  
and the dog would faithfully take his place, beside her.

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Unfortunately, the woman’s husband was a cruel man,  
who deeply resented her devotion to Christ.

And – one day – he beat her so severely that she died.

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He even denied her a Christian funeral.

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So – after the woman’s death, and burial –  
only the man and dog were left.

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The man – then – noticed something unusual:

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The dog disappeared every Wednesday evening – about 7:00 P.M. –  
and didn’t reappear for two hours.

And – every Sunday morning –  
the dog likewise disappeared for a couple of hours.

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One Sunday, the man’s curiosity was so aroused  
that he decided to follow – to see where the dog went.

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And – hurrying to keep up –  
the man followed the dog to the little church –  
where this woman had worshiped so faithfully.

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He watched as the dog took its seat on the aisle  
while the service went on.

Then – at the close of the service –  
the dog went to the altar....  
and took its place where the man's wife had prayed.

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The man was so touched that he, too, went forward  
and gave his life to Christ.

Now that dog – says James King –  
comes to church with a made-new master.

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**We are beginning a new year.**

Wouldn't it be great if we could also begin a new life –  
with a new Master – like the owner of that dog?

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Some of us are undoubtedly making resolutions for this New Year.

So it is that some wag has suggested that – this year –  
we should make resolutions that we can actually keep.

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For example, gain weight – at least 10 pounds.

Or stop exercising – it's a waste of time.

Or read less – after all, it just makes you think.

And spend more time with your favorite technology –  
then, you won't have time to think at all.

Or procrastinate more – starting tomorrow.

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These might be resolutions that people could keep.

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But what if – instead of making *resolutions* –  
we were to experience a *revolution*?

Suppose we turned completely around –  
with a new set of attitudes,  
a new set of motivations,  
a new set of feelings about God, about life, and about others?

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The **Good News** is that today's text – from **Ephesians** –  
offers precisely that kind of possibility.

**Paul** writes,

“Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ,  
who has blessed us in Christ  
with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places,  
just as he chose us in Christ before the foundation of the world  
to be holy and blameless before him in love.

He destined us – *for adoption as his children* – through Jesus Christ,  
according to the good pleasure of his will,  
to the praise of his glorious grace  
that he freely bestowed on us in the Beloved.”

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A key word – in this passage – is the word, “*adopted*.”

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Imagine you are a third world child, an orphan,  
living in poverty, and squalor.

Then a wealthy couple, from the developed world –  
a loving couple with vast resources, who desperately long for a child –  
comes to your sad orphanage.

And – through the filth, and the flies –  
they see a small – plaintive – face.

It is *your face*, and – they say to the person in charge –  
we want *that* child.

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And, they take you to *their home*,  
and they dress you in *new clothes*,  
and they give you wonderful, *new opportunities*.

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**But – most of all – they give you a new identity.**

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You are no longer an orphan, no longer a nobody.

Now, you are their child – *heir* to everything they own.

You have a place in the world.

You are no longer a *child of poverty*,  
but a *person of privilege*.

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**It is essential – then –  
that we understand that this is also our story.**

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This is precisely what **Paul** meant –  
when he wrote to the **Romans** –

(5:8)

***“But God demonstrates his own love for us in this:  
While we were still sinners, Christ died for us.”***

And – in today’s reading –

***“He destined us for adoption as his children – through Jesus Christ,  
according to the good pleasure of his will”***

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It may seem ironic,  
but the greatest barrier to our truly embracing a new life in Christ  
is that we already have it so good.

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Certainly, there are challenges – that each of us face.

But – nevertheless – a huge majority of the people in the world  
would give anything to be in our shoes.

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And, *it is* hard to be a Christian –  
when you are surrounded by so much affluence.

It is easy to think that we do not need God –  
when we can get all our daily needs met by mammon –  
at least, that is how it appears to the casual mind.

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And it may be that growing up in a **Christian culture**  
*actually works against us* – to a certain extent.

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Some of us have been in the church all our lives.

And, we have had loving families –  
who supported us – and nurtured us – in healthy values.

So, how can we be lost?  
How can we need saving?

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But – on the other hand – if we had struggled more with life,  
we would understand what good news the **Gospel** really is.

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**Pastor Edward Markquart** – a Lutheran pastor in Seattle –  
tells about a young man who approached him – one Wednesday night –  
following an activity at their church.

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This young man came to Markquart to show him his progress in school.

He pulled his grades out of his black, leather jacket,  
and laid them on the altar – for Markquart to see.

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The young man was not a child – not even a teenager.

He was thirty-three years old,  
going to a technical school,  
and he was studying to become a licensed practical nurse.

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Markquart looked at the grade card.

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The young man had an A in pharmacology.

He also had an A in practicum;  
the on-the-floor practical nursing – which is so important.

And, he was proud of his achievement.

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Then, the young man reminded Markquart of his story:

Twenty years ago he had dropped out of school – as well as life –  
at the age of thirteen.

“It was twenty years since he had been in school.

He used drugs, marijuana, cocaine, alcohol –  
and everything else the world had to offer – in those years.

For more than a decade, he had been a prisoner, a captive.

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But slowly, ever so slowly, he found himself.

Slowly he was healed, and slowly he was liberated,  
and now he [was] getting A’s in school.

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He was so proud as he laid his report on the altar....”

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That young man would certainly understand the metaphor of adoption.

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He now had a new life.

He had been pulled from darkness into the light.

He had been brought – from spiritual poverty – to spiritual plenty.

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And – in a sense – he had been blind,  
but now he could see.

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But it is possible *for us* – on the other hand – *not to see*.

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We've been in church all our lives;  
the **Christian life** may have become just a synonym:  
for respectability...,  
for decency...,  
for fitting in....

But – as **British evangelist Michael Green** says –

*“Jesus did not come to make bad [people] good,  
but to make dead [people] live.”*

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And so – what Christ offers us this year –  
is an opportunity for an entirely new life:  
a new attitude, a new sense of identity, a new heart....

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But – the fact is – that is unlikely to happen....  
unless we truly understand what God has done for us.

We must understand our need before we can appreciate –  
and appropriate –  
God's provision.

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A bit earlier in this passage,  
**Paul** calls us a *chosen people*.

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**Israel** *was* a chosen people – *chosen to be a light* unto the world.

And – in the same way – *we* are a chosen people,  
chosen to be God's people.

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Do you remember the first time *you* were chosen for anything?

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Author **Bruce Larson** says his first memory – of being chosen –  
came in the third grade –  
when he was chosen to be a blackboard monitor.

But, he was chosen – not because he was a model student –  
but because his parents wined and dined his teacher.

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Then – when he got the privilege of cleaning the blackboards –  
he thought he had arrived.

That is, until his classmates began to call him “teacher’s pet.”

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His new status was a mixed blessing.

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His next triumph came in sixth grade –  
when he was chosen to be a member of the safety patrol.

He could wear that white belt and a badge,  
and order his fellow fifth and sixth graders –  
to stop and start, at will – at street crossings.

However – he says – he also bore the stigma  
of being part of “the establishment.”

And – at recess – safety patrol members were often teased and avoided.

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Being chosen – once again – had its bitter side.

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Later – as a member of his high school football team –  
he dreamed of someday being chosen for the starting lineup.

And, the day finally came  
when the coach read off the names of the starting team  
and said, “*Larson, right tackle.*”

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This was his glorious moment, except that – he says –  
he was well aware that he was chosen  
because the first and second string right tackles  
were both out with injuries.

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Furthermore, his team was soundly defeated.

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Then, there was the junior prom.

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Of all the girls he knew, he wanted – most of all –  
to go with a young lady named **Marjorie**.

**Marjorie** said, “Yes,” and this was a triumph.

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But – as he learned later –  
she had only chosen him as her date –  
because she really wanted to go with his best friend –  
who had asked somebody else.

She was only going with him in order to be near his friend.

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Larson says he felt like the young man – who said to his girlfriend,  
*“Darling, I don’t have a sailboat and a sports car – like Jerome,  
but I love you with all my heart.”*

*“I love you too, dear,”* she replied,  
*“but tell me more about Jerome.”*

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Being chosen by God can be a mixed blessing, too –  
if we don’t understand what God desires of us.

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Before Jesus’ time, the prophets tried to remind Israel  
that God chose it to be blessed,  
but – also – that God chose it *to be a blessing* to others.

And that is why God chose us as well:  
God has blessed us;  
we are to be a blessing to others.

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**Rabbi Marc Gafni** recalls one of the first *bar mitzvahs* he ever performed – it was for a boy, named **Louis**.

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**Louis** was awkward and sad,  
and his insensitive parents did little to encourage his self-esteem.

They even implied that he was dumb –  
too dumb to learn the traditional **Hebrew** passages  
that a boy recites for his *bar mitzvah*.

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**Rabbi Gafni** was determined to *bring out the best* in Louis.

He spent extra time teaching him the songs and prayers.

And – along the way – he discovered that Louis was *smart*,  
and had a *fantastic singing voice*.

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On the day of his *bar mitzvah*, Louis *performed beautifully*.

And – at the end of the ceremony –  
**Rabbi Gafni** stood – and spoke directly to Louis.

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He said,

*“Louis, this morning you met your real self.*

*This is who you are.*

*You are good, graceful, talented, and smart.*

*“Whatever people told you yesterday,  
and Louis, whatever happens tomorrow,  
promise me one thing.*

*“Remember . . . this is you.*

*Remember, and don't ever lose it.”*

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A few years later, Louis wrote to **Rabbi Gafni**.

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The boy – whose *parents predicted* that he was too dumb –  
to perform a traditional *bar mitzvah* –  
was studying for his medical degree,  
and, at an **Ivy League** university.

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He was also engaged to be married.

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Louis ended his letter by saying,

*"...I kept my promise –*

*I always remembered my bar mitzvah morning  
when you said that this is who I am.*

*For this, I thank you."*

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Friends, the key to true life – and not just to 2026 –  
is to *understand who we are....*  
because of *what God has done* for us.

It will be a *revolutionary* discovery,  
and one that we can gladly *resolve* to share with others

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**In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit:**

*Amen.*

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**\*AFFIRMATION OF FAITH (*Unison*)**

*(Adapted from the Westminster Confession of Faith (1647))*

**In the gospel God declares his love for the world and his desire that all should be saved; reveals fully and clearly the only way of salvation; promises eternal life to all who truly repent and believe in Christ; invites and commands all to embrace the offered mercy; and by the Holy Spirit accompanying the Word pleads with us to accept his gracious invitation. It is the duty and privilege of everyone who hears the gospel to immediately accept its merciful provisions. Since there is no other way of salvation than that revealed in the gospel, and since faith comes by hearing the Word of God, Christ has commissioned his church to go into all the world and to make disciples of all nations.**

**All believers are, therefore, under obligation to contribute by their prayers, gifts, and personal efforts to the extension of the kingdom of Christ throughout the whole earth.**

## THE ORDINATION AND INSTALLATION OF OFFICERS

### PRESENTATION OF THE CANDIDATES

Elder John Stevens

On behalf of the congregation, and with the approbation of the Session,  
I am pleased to present the following candidates for office:

For Session, Caroline Beard and Mark Collender,  
to be ordained and installed as Ruling Elders, for the Class of 2028.

Also, for the Session, we present: JoAnna Ventresca,  
to be installed to fill a one-year term, for the Class of 2026.

For Deacons, we present: Denise Snyder to be installed,  
and Laurie Collender, to be ordained and installed, for the Class of 2028

For Trustees, we present: Maya Hirs, for the Class of 2028,  
and John Stevens to fill a two-year term, for the Class of 2027.

### SACRAMENT OF THE LORD'S SUPPER

#### CHARGE AND BENEDICTION

The *revolution* available to us in **Jesus Christ** is possible  
only because **God** *resolved* to do so.

May we now *resolve* to share it with others.

Let us receive the Lord's benediction....