

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent III, December 16, 2007, dedicated to the new members and their children joining today and to the memory of Rich Gibson who wished to be in fellowship with us before his sudden death and always to the glory of God!

“Isaiah 35: The Dancing Desert”

Isaiah 35:1-10; Matthew 11:2-11

Part III of VII in the Sermon Series:

“Isaiah’s Vision: Welcome the Messiah!”

+++++

Let us pray: May the words of my mouth and the meditations of each one of our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Matthew’s gospel lesson opens with John the Baptist in prison facing death by beheading. His time is at hand. His ministry of baptizing for the forgiveness of sins is near an end.

He sends his disciples to Jesus to ask if Jesus is the one they have been seeking or if they should seek another. Jesus’ answer sounds like an echo of the prophet Isaiah. He says, “Go tell John what you hear and see; the blind can see, the lame can walk, lepers are clean, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have received good news” (Matthew 2: 4-5). The Messiah answers with the words of the prophet.

Isaiah has his own way of awakening the heart. He says: *Weak hands are strengthened. Feeble knees become strong. Fearful hearts are fearless. The blind see. The deaf hear. The lame leap. The speechless sing for joy. If human transformation is not enough, there are abundant streams flowing in the desert, burning sands*

becoming springs of water and crocuses blooming in barren soil, and a wilderness defined by singing and rejoicing everywhere!

While the Messiah declares, “*You tell John what you hear and see,*” he is simply echoing the prophet who declares everlasting joy and gladness have abolished sorrow and sighing. Isaiah has established that God will return and reign in Zion. The prophet’s vision is fulfilled in the Messiah’s presence of redemption.

I love these texts. The prophet Isaiah gives life and breath to the wiping away of all that is evil, all that is painful, all that blights life as we know it, while Jesus, The Messiah, FULFILLS these words of healing and hope. I love these texts. They point to a realized eschatology - a cleansed humanity and a vibrant earth.

In *The Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin, a palaeontologist and natural theologian, speaks of God’s intention to bring all things in heaven and earth to fulfillment in Christ. He writes:

We are sometimes inclined to think that the same things are monotonously repeated over and over again in the history of creation. That is because the season is too long by comparison with the brevity of our individual lives, and the transformation too vast and too inward by comparison with our superficial and restricted outlook, for us to see the progress of what is tirelessly taking place in and through all matter and spirit. Let us believe in revelation, once again our faithful support in our most human forebodings. Under the commonplace envelope of things and all our purified and salvaged efforts, a new earth is being slowly engendered.

After speaking to the coming of Christ in the end of time and our call to be constantly part of the preparation in history, deChardin concludes:

May the time come when men and women having been awakened to the close bond linking all the movements of this

*world in the single all-embracing work of the Incarnation, shall be unable to give themselves to any one of their tasks without illuminating it with the clear vision that their work, however elementary it may be, is received and put to good use by a Center of the Universe (as quoted in Mary McAleese, *Reconciling Being: Love in Chaos*, New York, Continuum Publishing Group, 1999).*

We are heirs of God's Incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. Nevertheless, it is often difficult to see what we do in the context of the Center of the Universe, the Divine Love of God, or the healing of humanity. The vastness of the Universe certainly has the ability to overwhelm us.

For example, we may say, "*I cannot make the lame leap for joy.*" But, what can I do? I can be a physical therapist who helps a man stand following a terrible accident or walk after a stroke. Aha! In this, we have connected to the all-embracing work of the Incarnation. *These are the sinews of Incarnation!*

We may say, "*A cannot make the speechless sing for joy.*" But, what can I do? I can be a speech therapist who helps a stroke victim say his first word after a debilitating brain injury. Again, we have connected to the Incarnation. The synapses of God's Immense Universe have fired in our brain and connected to the speech of one of God's beloved children! *This is the voice of Incarnation!*

We may say, "*A cannot set the prisoner free.*" And yet, what can we do? I have seen men and women in this congregation, go into prison cells and minister to prisoners in such a way that their minds, spirits, hearts, and faith are freed to new life! The only left behind bars are their bodies! *This is the liberating hope of Incarnation!*

We may say, "*I cannot bring good news to the poor.*" And yet, thanks to the work of BREAD and a coalition of other statewide justice groups, led by our own John Aeschbury and Bill Faith, there

are two bills before the Ohio State Legislature to regulate Pay Day Lending institutions – which now number over 1,500 – more than Wendy’s, McDonald’s and Burger Kings in Ohio. The Batchelder/Hagan bill (House Bill #333) calls for current interest rates, which are 391%, to be no higher than 36% - which is the top rate for veterans at these legal loan shark stores. The other bill is a bogus bill, which makes no change at all. I know people in our congregation who have gone to Pay Day Lenders and are struggling to make ends meet, stay off the streets and out of foreclosure. This bill will bring good news to the poor. You can make a difference. *This is the just conscience of Incarnation!*

We may say, “*I am no Isaiah! I am no Jesus of Nazareth.*” And yet, when you transform a garden, when you take barren, rocky land and make it beautiful, when you reach out and touch a neighbor who has no friend, when you send a card, make a call, offer yourself in prayer and presence to others, you are part of the Incarnation of God in Christ. You are part of the prophetic imagination and the purposeful fulfillment of God’s plan of salvation, which is after all , nothing more than the healing of one the Universe, one person at a time, one step at a time, one word at a time and one moment at time.

When Isaiah prophesied deliverance to his people and pointed to the Messiah of God, he was part of the Divine Milieu. He was part of the creative process through which we would welcome the Messiah.

In his book *No Future Without Forgiveness*, Bishop Desmond Tutu tells of the work of South Africa’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. He tells one story after another of victims of apartheid and the process his nation whet through to forgive centuries of hatred, oppression and abuse by white South Africans against the majority of blacks in the nation. In one story, he tells of a woman who recognized the mutilated body of her brother because of the shoes he was wearing. In the end he concludes, there can be no future without forgiveness. He takes this message to Israel and

Palestine; to Northern Ireland and Viet Nam, to Rwanda and the Sudan. Because Tutu has encountered the power of reconciliation in his homeland through the painful and arduous process of victims facing abusers and families facing the killers of the children and spouses - Nobel Peace Prize Winner Desmond Tutu says, *“People listened to me and had to give credence to my words because we had chosen another way in my homeland. It was the way of Jesus Christ.”*

Speaking of his experience in Northern Ireland, Bishop Tutu says:

*I was able to say to those remarkable people in Belfast that nothing is lost. What they were doing advanced the course of reconciliation. What each of us does to retard or promote, can hinder or advance, the process at the heart of the universe. Christians would say the outcome is not in question. The death and resurrection of Jesus Christ puts the issue beyond doubt; ultimately goodness and laughter and peace and compassion and gentleness and forgiveness and reconciliation will have the last word and prevail over their ghastly counterparts. The victory over apartheid was proof positive of the truth of this seemingly utopian dream (Desmond Tutu, *No Future Without Forgiveness*, NY, NY, Doubleday, 1999, p. 267).*

In Isaiah and Matthew - creation is transformed and a disabled humanity is healed through the power of God. But, who do you think God is calling upon to be the healing agents of creation and humanity?

For the crocus to bloom in the dancing desert; for the lame to leap for joy and the speechless to speak, we need to believe that we are part of God's plan of Incarnation. We need to see ourselves as part of the Incarnation - part of the blooming, part of the healing. When we do, seemingly utopian dreams become part of our story of hope and God's story of transformation. Amen.