

A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent IV, December 23, 2007, dedicated to Mike and Jane Weddle on their 35<sup>th</sup> Wedding Anniversary Day and always to the glory of God!

***“Isaiah 7: Refuse Evil, Accept Good”***

***Part IV of VII in Sermon Series:  
“Isaiah’s Vision: Welcome the Messiah!”  
Isaiah 7:10-16; Matthew 1:16-25***

+++++

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 strength and our salvation. Amen.

+++++

Every Christmas, something happens somewhere which stirs up the blood in certain kinds of Christians. Usually it has to do with a Nativity scene in a public square. This year, Green Bay, Wisconsin earned the crown of “largest city with strangest Nativity story.” Apparently, the city voted 7-6, with the mayor casting the deciding vote to leave the Nativity scene lit on top of city hall. The mayor said about his vote, *“It is Christmas after all. And Christianity is the majority religion in the land.”* He went on to say his vote was cast for the majority of Green Bay citizens. They were not going to put up any other religious symbols because, “It was all about Christmas.” He had even talked with the Rabbi in town – but since Chanuka was past, they had no need for a menorah. The story didn’t say if he was a Democrat, Republican or the leading political subgroup in the land - Independent. But, I must throw my hat in the ring with the Aesthetics Party - a minority party who wonder why the Nativity is on top of city hall in the first place. Sounds a bit tacky to me.

Another controversy of the season started in November with the impending release of “The Golden Compass.” I started receiving emails similar to the ones I always get about J. K. Rowling and Harry Potter. In the Potter emails, the gist has always been that stories about wizards and magic are bad for our children. I have always contended that these arguments are complete rubbish when we come from a faith that is based in parables, prophecies, miracles and the resurrection - all claims that call for imagination and trust in what is “not seen.” Harry Potter is really about the struggle between good and evil. Hopefully, Christians can support that.

With *The Golden Compass* controversy, conservative Christian groups were calling for a boycott against the film. The guardians of all truth (my phrase not theirs) were saying anything by Philip Pullman should be banned because he is an avowed atheist and is outspoken against organized religion. They said, Philip Pullman’s trilogy, *His Dark Materials*, of which *The Golden Compass* is the first book attempts to “kill God in the minds of children.” They said that *The Golden Compass*’ purpose is to “bash Christianity, promote atheism and sell atheism to our children.”

I share something in common with the proponents of the boycott. I have not seen the film either. My reason is related to how poorly made I heard it is and how busy I have been. I’ve heard from a handful of people who ventured into this abyss of unbelief that it is “harmless, non-objectionable, and not very well made.” Whatever happened to refusing to see movies because they were poor quality, poorly acted and poorly told films rather than rated unseeable by the Christians in the Nothing Better To Do League?

I ask instead, W.W.I.S. – “What Would Isaiah Say?” It seems to me that it is time to invoke Prophetic Imagination into our discourse on rooftop crèches and directionless films. Somewhere in my youth or childhood, I had adults in my life who introduced me to a concept called, “Creative Thinking.” Most of them were Christians . . . at

least I thought they were. But, you know what, some of the best were Jews - thanks be to God!

Nevertheless, if I had run a truth serum through their brains, I might have discovered some of them had read *The Golden Compass*. I am sure some of them had grown up reading Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. I know one of them loved *Beowulf* before it was turned into religious fiction. If the serum had flowed long enough through their brains, and their tongues had been loosened to speak the truth, I would have found out that they had read the Jewish prophets of old - none of whom were Christians and all of whom questioned organized religion and government in their times. I bet I would have found out they had read authors who were not at all Christian! Maybe, these authors had lost their faith in Christianity, like Pullman, by listening **to those within our faith tradition teach fear instead of** instead of the preachers, teachers and authors who dared to have creative imagination.

Although I have not read Pullman, Ryan McCarl has read him. He grew up loving the stories found in Pullman's trilogy. In *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, December 10, 2007, McCarl wrote these words:  
*Pullman's real quarrel is less with belief itself than with the intolerance that organized belief systems sometimes foster, an intolerance demonstrated every time some busybody condemns a book without having actually read it.*

McCarl continues:

*There are a lot of sophisticated theological and philosophical ideas woven into the "His Dark Materials" narrative. The story speaks as positively about religious concepts such as soul, spiritual existence and love as it speaks negatively about intolerance and bigotry. **It opens a window in the reader's mind and invites him or her to investigate all of these ideas further** . . . To listen to take seriously alternative viewpoints*

*is to make oneself vulnerable; it raises the possibility that our certainty is not as justified as we had thought.*

McCarl, a master's student in international relations at the University of Chicago and a freelance writer concludes:

*Great stories are the stuff of which religious beliefs are made. Literature shapes and expands our imagination, and imagination is critically important to our ability to believe. In religious practice we are asked to internalize symbols, such as the cross, seeing them not as mere shapes or designs but as signs that point toward the infinite. We are asked to believe in unseen forces that never register on scientific instruments. We are asked to imagine ourselves as part of a human community larger than ourselves and our families, and we are asked to imagine our lives not as meaningless evolutionary aberrations but as part of a grander narrative of creation.*

You see - Belief is not for the unimaginative. Belief is for those who can see beyond the stars and behind the atom. If belief were for the weak of mind and spirit, we would stay at home. We stop our singing. We would end our prayers. We would give up on symbols and stories, parables and prophecies.

Every year, I am amazed by the creative genius of Andrew Welsh-Huggins who creates a children's Christmas story - sometimes for far away galaxies. He brings laughter to our children and imagination to light. Every story ends at the manger. Even if its space aliens and robots who proclaim our Savior's birth, they find their way to Bethlehem of Judea and proclaim the birth of Jesus!

My guess is that Andrew has found his creative inspiration in the fiction section of the local library and not in factscheck.com. If we seek to find convincing evidence for eternal things in this universe, we need to develop in ourselves and our children an imagination that belief requires. Thank you, Andrew. You bring Christmas alive for me, my family and for so many of us each year. Thank you!

Again, I ask – “W.W.I.S.” – “What Would Isaiah Say?” We actually know, don’t we! Isaiah was entangled in belief system controversy of his own back in the 8<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Ahaz, the King of Judah, was in a foreign policy crisis, fearful that his two closest neighbors to the north, Syria and Israel, would strike his nation. Isaiah warns his king that **ONLY FAITH** will rescue him from the apparent threat. The King trusts in the security of military might. The prophet Isaiah assures Ahaz that faith in Yahweh will save, even in a political crisis. The prophet challenges the King to test God on this. Quoting scripture, the King responds quoting the command, “You shall not put the Lord your God to the test (Dt. 6:16).” The King’s refusal to engage God and ultimately to trust in God to deliver him from his enemies pushes the prophet to proclaim a devastating oracle in Isaiah 7:13-17. The prophet puts the royal apparatus on notice. In the process he speaks of “My God” and in so doing implies that Yahweh is no longer “Your God,” to the King.

In the fullness of prophetic imagination, Isaiah goes on to proclaim: *“Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son and his name shall be called ‘Immanuel - God with us’ . . . before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread, will be deserted.”* This is prophetic imagination at its best. That innocent baby with the odd name is the point of this proclamation. The prophet isn’t trying to fix the foreign affair crisis. *“Instead he gathers the entire fearful drama of public life and reorganizes it around a baby. Because of this baby, public history is not merely a matter of brute power. Public history is working on a different schedule toward a different purpose. The baby is a time bomb in the midst of the great powers, which they can neither stop nor deactivate”* (Walter Brueggemann, texts for Preaching Year A, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, p. 30).

In our Christian tradition, we dare to claim this daring prophetic sign as our sign for the coming of Jesus into this world. Our Advent

question, just 36 hours away from midnight arrival of Christmas is the same one faced by Ahaz 2700 years ago. It is the same one faced by Herod and by Pilate, 2000 years ago. What would happen if life were so reorganized that a baby's presence became the central reality? Everything - I mean EVERYTHING - changes when "God is with us." EVERYTHING changes when the baby arrives.

We need to be imaginative, creative, curious and ready for the baby. Every Friday, I volunteer at Sarah's school. For 15 years of Fridays you can find me at Bluffsvie Elementary School. Two days ago, I was grading sixth grade tests in the library when the kindergarteners came bouncing in. They know, better than the big people, what is coming! They were smiling, waving, dancing, bouncing and trying hard to be quite. They were so adorable. Four days (now two) before Christmas, they could barely contain themselves. They had their library time and as they lined up to go back to class, I asked one little beaming light of God (known as a kindergartner!), what was so exciting? I asked, "What are you waiting for?" He answered, "Don't YOU know?" "Know what?" I responded. He said in a loud voice, "**Jesus is coming!**"

Like Isaiah, this young boy had the audacity to imagine, to envision and to proclaim God's truth: "Unto us a child will be born! Unto us, a son is given!" WWIS? - Get ready. A baby is coming! A baby will turn the world upside down! God is with us. The nations are nervous. Can you feel the kicks? Can you feel the sensation of worlds' turned upside down? In a library, out of the mouth of a young child, truth has been imagined and proclaimed - "**Jesus IS coming.**" Thanks be to God! Amen.