

An Advent Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, UCC, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 4, December 22, 2013, dedicated to Sue Salak and Diane Rambo who lost their mothers this week, to Jackie Turner and all men, women, and children who struggle to find family or who grieve deeply for the family they have lost – especially at Christmas time – and always to the glory of God!

“A Child Refusing Evil, Choosing Good”

**Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7;
Matthew 1:18-25
(Part IV of VI in sermon series,
“Salvation of the Lord”)**

For three Sundays, Dr. Wilson and I have lifted up this sermon series, “The Salvation of the Lord.” Sometimes our series titles are self-evident. I don’t think this one is. We have lifted up the prophecies coming out of Isaiah. His name translated from the Hebrew, “The Salvation of the Lord.” Simple enough. Now you know...

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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.

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As we enter the text from Isaiah 7, there is a battle raging between the prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah. The king is in a foreign policy crisis with his two close neighbors to north – Israel and Syria. The prophet has just warned Ahaz (vs. 4-6) that the *only faith* can save him (Walter Brueggemann, Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, pp. 28-29).

We pick up the story with the confrontation between prophet and king. It is really a confrontation between two contrasting security systems. Isaiah has given assurance that faith in God will save Ahaz and Judah. He goes one step further and challenges the king to set up a test as a way of determining if Isaiah speaks God's truth. The king refuses to test the defiant prophet – which is ironic – because such a refusal is actually a sign of piety in power struggle. He essentially appears to be following Deuteronomy 6:6 – “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*” But appearances can be deceiving. Look closer and you will see that he refuses to put his policies to the claims of faith because he prefers to act in his foolish autonomy. (Ibid).

The king's clever but stubborn refusal sets off the prophet of God. He launches into a devastating oracle. He puts the king on notice. He calls Yahweh “My God” and not “our God” and by implication – no longer “your God.” Yahweh has withdrawn from the dynasty. No more God in the Ahaz Dynasty. (No more God in Duck Dynasty either?). Isaiah is saying, “If your dynasty wants to be above God, so be it. But, you will fall hard!” Isaiah announces a sign – even though Ahaz has not asked for one! A young woman (not a virgin in the original oracle of Isaiah) shall bear a child whose name shall be Immanuel or “God with Us.” Before this child is old enough to consciously refuse evil and choose the good (around 2 years old by Old Testament standards), the pending threat of Israel and Syria will dissipate. That is the good news. The bad news is that while the little kings won't be a threat, the Assyrians further to the north are coming. Everyone knows the Assyrians are ruthless, brutal, massive, and beyond resistance. They are a devastating enemy. (Ibid).

The baby is the reason for this oracle. This baby – whom we have come to know as Jesus; but in the Judaism of 700BC the faithful Jews knew as Isaiah’s second son, Immanuel – (this baby) is a political time bomb in the midst of great powers. The baby reorders life in the public arena. The baby changes everybody’s schedules in the public square. If you don’t pay attention to a baby, you are in trouble. The innocence of a baby convicts the guilt of a King – every time.

Whether we read Isaiah’s prophecy as a prediction of the time it takes to topple a king (2 years and nine months) or a vision of Mary’s birthing Jesus, we have to look at the truth in this prophecy. It is this: Kings - and everyone else – must pay attention to babies.

Whether it is Ahaz or Herod as king - or Bush or Obama; Strickland or Kasich: what would happen if life were so reorganized that the baby’s presence became the central reality? The truth is – in political circles, in global politics, and in each one of our homes – everything changes when “God is with us.” Baby time changes everything!

I would go one step further. If political rulers don’t deal with babies and their feeding, housing, education, nurturance, sustenance, and care – it will come back to haunt said rulers – and everyone else. To not properly feed a child creates hungry ones who turn to crime as a way of survival. To not fully educate a child creates children who become potentially dull, ignorant, vulnerable and dangerous adults in time. To not care for a child can create a neglected, ignored, and loveless child. I have often said a life of lovelessness can create prime conditions for homelessness. Lack of care for babies creates a world in disarray. Isaiah knew this. So did Ahaz. So do we.

Missing “God with Us” in our midst happens a little bit at a time. This past week I was asked to make a Robo call (like the Phone tree of First Church which you all love). This one was different. On December 31st, food stamp benefits will be cut off for two groups – homeless veterans and foster children who are aging out of foster care system. I said, “No way!” So it will go out

tomorrow. I will call and I hope you will too to ask Governor Kasich to continue our 18 year old foster children and our Veterans who have served us well to continue on food stamp provisions until they are on their feet again. The dollars are there from the federal government. No cost to Ohioans – except the effect of more hungry children and veterans. Marty Worth knows that we will see them at our Good Samaritan program on January 1st if these cuts happen. “God with us” means – in the end – “We are with God, too.”

Babies change the way we DO LIFE.

How many of you have experienced the way a baby changes everything? Sleep, time, schedules, attention, shopping, Christmas, church, life – all get turned inside out and upside down by a baby. This “God with Us” baby is no different – and yet is completely different. “God with Us” will – in time – change the world itself. Did someone say – December 25th? Sleep, time, schedules, attention, shopping, Christmas, church, life are all turned inside out and upside down by a baby born over 2000 years ago. Since he came into the world, thousands of rulers since his time have had to deal with him in some way or another. He has that effect on people.

“God with Us” is a title that could apply to all God’s children. Every child born in this life is a reflection of “God with us.” What makes our Immanuel special is that he refused evil and chose the good from birth all the way to his untimely death on a cross. He was born innocent and never stopped being innocent. It is this quality on which I would like to focus as we consider our salvation in his name.

There are many temptations to do evil, to follow evil, to give in to evil all around us – every day. If we hide our faces in the sand, they won’t go away. Innocent little ones are hurt all the time. They are beaten, neglected, abandoned and left behind. Quite frankly, I believe we need to fight evil with all that we have in us. It is insidious. It is heinous. It rots the soul and attacks the innocent.

This is the season and we are the people who can and should battle the presence of evil in this world. I was very touched by a story of a young woman near Sacramento, CA which I heard on the CBS News Friday. Steve Hartman (an Ohioan by birth) in his "On the Road" series told of a junior at William Jessup University. She seems to have it all. Her name is Jackie Turner. Jackie has straight A's, good friends and a big heart. She works part-time as a tutor and eventually wants a career helping troubled kids.

Her future is definitely bright, but the clouds still roll in every December.

"This time of year is hard," Jackie said. "Everyone is talking about their cousins, their families, all the things that make up Christmas." Jackie says she doesn't have any of that -- and never did. Asked to recall some of the pleasant memories of her childhood, Jackie was silent. You could see her mind and spirit sinking into the past. She said, "I remember getting locked up and locked in rooms. And I remember getting beatings for stealing food." Born to a mother she never met and dad she wished she hadn't, Jackie said she was abused, neglected, and starved.

She's been able to move on -- for 11 months out of every year, at least. But that 12th has always posed a problem, which is why this year she decided to take action. Jackie said, *"This hurting, you're tired of it, what are you going to do? And I was like, 'Craigslist.'" That's right, she said Craigslist -- where most people go to find a new apartment or used car, Jackie went looking for a happier holiday.*

Specifically, her classified said, *"I want to rent a mom and dad."* She continued, *"Maybe for like a couple hours -- I could be like the light of their life for that moment."* She was even willing to pay, she said, *"Eight bucks, just to sit, which for a college student is affordable."*

Jackie got dozens of responses -- about half from parents who wanted to help, for free of course -- and about half from other young people who felt the same way she did.

"People are hurting and broken and we need each other," Jackie said. "We need to be loving people. And I think that's what tonight's about."

So, Jackie held a meeting for all the people who contacted her. Her purpose: to pair up the needy with the needed to make sure no one in the room feels alone this holiday season. Jackie made about a half-a-dozen matches that night including one for herself -- a woman from university student services named Anita Hermsmeier. *"I found my Mentor,"* Jackie cried as she embraced Anita.

Jackie went to Craig's List thinking she wanted to rent a family, now she's creating them. December is looking brighter already. (© 2013 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved, Friday, December 20, 2013).

Jackie is the child – all grown up – who is refusing evil and choosing good. There is a Jackie Turner in our community, in our lives, too. We don't have to go to Sacramento to find her. We only have to open our eyes and ears to see and hear God with us in our times. Do we have ears to hear? Eyes to see?

Like Jackie, let us find little ways to make difference – little ways to resist evil and choose good. Evil wants to grab hold of us. But, there is that child – Immanuel – "God with Us" – who already has grabbed hold of us. Let him hang onto to you. May he get inside your soul. He will change you. In the end, he will save you – for he is the salvation of the Lord. Amen.

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