

*A Christmas Eve communion meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister of the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Christmas Eve, 12/24/13, 7:30/11:00pm, dedicated to the amazing class of 2014 and all the youth of First Church and Mark Williams for his leadership, to the Deacons of First Church who are here each week serving God and all of us, to the staff of First church who give their hearts and souls to this church each day and always to the glory of God!*

# ***“The Salvation of the Lord”***

***Isaiah 9:2-7, Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20***

***(Part V of V in the sermon series, “The Salvation of the Lord”)***

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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, our rock and our salvation. Amen.*

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On a dark, sub-freezing, snowy night in late December, a knock came on the back door of our Cleveland home. Only friends came to the back door of the parsonage which was 30 feet from Bethany UCC on Cleveland’s Westside. I was upstairs writing and Susan was downstairs with our six month old son, Luke. She called my name sounding calm but her voice had clear urgency in it. She said, “Tim, please come down here now.”

As I bound down the steps I arrived to find huddled on our small porch a mother, father, and tiny baby. None of them were warmly dressed. All of them were in peril on this cold Cleveland winter night – with the wind-chill below zero. The man spoke. He said words I will never forget, “*We are homeless. Can you help us?*” In an instance - Homelessness was not an “issue” or a social problem. It was a mother, father and tiny baby looking us in the eyes on a winter night. It was the holiness of a family in need. Homelessness was our own Mary, Joseph and baby Jesus knocking on the door of our Inn and asking for shelter from the storm. It was real.

Susan, Luke and I invited them into the parsonage – our church’s home. As they crossed our threshold, they brought the cold in with them. They were half frozen. But, they were homeless no more. They were in our home. We brought them into our living room. All the things they owned were “housed” in a rickety baby stroller. They were so cold; they didn’t take off their coats. We wrapped them up in blankets. Susan fixed them some food. Their baby met our baby. Their baby was wrapped so tight in a blanket; I was surprised when mom “unpacked” her Christmas bundle to reveal a baby boy no more than a few weeks old. At six months, Luke looked like a giant next this skinny, hungry baby.

As they thawed out and we talked, their story became clearer. They had no place to turn. They had no family to turn to; no shelters to go to (it was the 1980’s – homelessness had not been fully institutionalized). There was only one thing to do – have them stay with us. So Susan and I set to work. We fed them, housed them in the nursery of our church and got them supplies for their baby. Within two weeks, we had them in an apartment with clothes and furniture. We even helped the young man get a job. Here is an example of the church of Jesus Christ shining God’s light. Without the good people of Bethany and good people in our neighborhood, this holy family of Cleveland might have died on the streets.

When the wind blows from the north and the calendar page turns to December I think of the holy family of Cleveland that came knocking on our door so many years ago. Sadly, the Holy Family of Bethlehem is everywhere to be seen – if we but open our eyes and look. On Christmas Day, some of them find their way to our doors at First Church through Bethlehem on Broad Street. Thank you for all you do to welcome them.

Throughout this Advent season, we have focused on the Salvation of the Lord. As we kneel by the manger this night, we come face to face with this truth about salvation. The goal of our Christian life is salvation. But, I would argue from now until the day I die (and beyond) that salvation is about how we live our lives on this side of heaven. Salvation isn’t about an other-worldly, heavenly reunion with Christ and our loved ones. It is not about the “Sweet-by-and-by.” It is about the here and now. Salvation is about the healing of people in our times.

The best single English synonym for “salvation” is “transformation.” The God of Salvation calls us to transform our lives and the world. Salvation is always about personal transformation and transformation of society as a whole. Salvation is both/and not either/or.

Salvation can be experienced as healing—a salve - a healing ointment. In Eastern orthodoxy, the primary definition of salvation is enlightenment – centered

in the belief that Jesus came as a light in our darkness. This speaks to the idea of living people who are dead inside, people for whom the light of God has gone out, to be lit from within once again to shine God's light. In this sense, salvation is about transformation from death to life. When we are saved, we are moved from pre-occupation and anxiety to presence and compassion.

For this moment, please allow me to carry this thought one step further – to see salvation through the eyes of one who faced his own mortality for 2 ½ years in four of Hitler's concentration camps. Dr. Viktor Frankl wrote about life, death and love in classic book Man's Search for Meaning.

On a death march in the cold of winter, Dr. Frankl could only think of his wife and his love for her. His mind became transfixed on one idea:

*A thought transfixed me: for the first time in my life I saw the truth as it is set into song by so many poets, proclaimed as the final wisdom by so many thinkers. The truth — that love is the ultimate and the highest goal to which man can aspire. Then I grasped the meaning of the greatest secret that human poetry and human thought and belief have to impart: **The salvation of man is through love and in love.***

*I came to understand how a man who has nothing left in this world still may know bliss, be it only for a brief moment, in the contemplation of his beloved. In a position of utter desolation, when man cannot express himself in positive action, when his only achievement may consist in enduring his sufferings in the right way — an honorable way — in such a position man can, through loving contemplation of the image he carries of his beloved, achieve fulfillment. For the first time in my life I was able to understand the meaning of the words, "**The angels are lost in perpetual contemplation of an infinite glory.**"*

Dr. Frankl is right - **The salvation of humanity is through love and in love.** Love is at the center of Salvation. As such, tonight's story of salvation through the birth of Christ is a love story. In this love story, the saving power of the newborn Christ comes home tonight. Salvation comes home tonight. Once again, we are drawn to see our Savior - the greatest lover of all humanity - lying as a newborn in a feed trough in a barn in Bethlehem.

There is a knock at our door on this night. We open it once again. It is Joseph and Mary – with child. Joseph implores, "*We are homeless. Can you help us?*" We open our doors, our hearts, our love and the Savior of the World comes in. Phillip Brooks wrote this way:

*How silently, how silently, The wondrous gift is given!  
So God imparts to human hearts, The blessings of His heaven.  
No ear may hear His coming, But in this world of sin,  
Where meek souls will receive him still, The dear Christ enters in.*

I pray that our Savior, the Light of the world, enters into your heart this Christmas.  
Amen.