

“Courage Can’t Wait”

Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25

Part IV of VI in the sermon series “What Can’t Wait”

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent IV, December 22, 2019, dedicated to Franz Jägerstätter, martyr of our faith, Mark Galli, editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today*, all fathers who, like Joseph, are faithful to their wives and children, especially to adoptive dads who love their sons and daughters beyond their blood connections and always to the glory of God!

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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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At exactly 11:19 p.m. last night, December 21st, we entered winter. What we know as the winter solstice is the day with the least length of light in the northern hemisphere. But it is matched as the day with the longest light by our southern hemispheric neighbors. Earth has this beautiful balance, this magnificent dance of light and darkness today. By tomorrow,

our days will begin to lengthen and ultimately reach the fullness of light on June 20, 2020 at 5:44 p.m. in the northern hemisphere as our summer solstice arrives. Six months from the day we were cast in darkness we are bathed in light – as our southern hemispheric neighbors face their shortest day. The symmetry and balance of the created order of Earth is so beautiful, so predictable. We may not yearn for the shortest day, but its presence passes and light is ascending once more. Incredible.

The movement of light and darkness are played out in our scriptures today as Isaiah and Joseph introduce us to the child born to save. Both Isaiah and Joseph are living in the darkness of their political times – under the leadership of hateful and demented kings. Both are filled with God's light and great courage. Both of them share the light of God through their courageous actions.

The 8th Century BC Prophet Isaiah lived under the reign of a sociopathic narcissistic demagogue named Ahaz, King of Judah. King Ahaz had brought a crisis to his nation by bleeding the people dry domestically through his policies which increased the poor and enhanced his own wealth and the wealth of his cronies. Weakened internally, Ahaz faced 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 IN GOD** will rescue him from the apparent threat. But, as you know, a narcissist sees

only himself and thus has faith only in himself (he is his own God, if you will). He can't pray to God. He can only consult himself for what are always the right answers.

Ahaz 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. Strangely and inappropriately quoting scripture, the King responds, *"You shall not put the Lord your God to the test"* (Dt. 6:16). Not the right answer by a long shot. This is an absolutely insane and ridiculous thing to say to THE prophet of GOD.

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 essence this strips Ahaz of the right to call the God, "God." God is outside the palace of the King. This means, the narcissistic has gotten what he wants. He is all alone to call the shots. He can consult only himself – because in his unrighteousness, in his soullessness, he has divorced himself from God.

Isaiah is not done. 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 sounding name is the point of this proclamation. The prophet isn't trying to fix the foreign affair crisis. Walter Brueggemann writes this: *“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).

The Narcissistic sociopathic demagogue is put on notice by the prophet of God. A child will rise up and lead. He will carry and embody God's presence is all that he says and does. **“God is with us”** – at an age when he is not even yet able to **“Refuse Evil and Choose Good”** - will lead people toward God's light.

Isaiah, who is a prophet within the courts of the king, not an outsider looking in like Amos, is full of courage as he faces down a narcissistic sociopath leader nose to nose. He literally puts his life on the line as he speaks truth to power.

But Isaiah is not the only messenger to speak about the birth of babies to save the world. Fast forward 800 years. In Matthew's gospel, an angel intervenes with Joseph who is about to divorce Mary for what appears to be infidelity. Through this nameless angel, **God is Still Speaking.**

Interestingly, after Matthew's genealogy with 48 names in the first 17 verses of chapter one, we have NO name for the angel who appears here. Nevertheless, the nameless angel brings a message and a name to Joseph. The angel assures Mary's betrothed that the child she is carrying is a "gift from God given by the Holy Spirit." Joseph will name him "Jesus" and adopt him as his son into the lineage of David. He will "save the people from their sins." In other words, Jesus IS the long-awaited savior. He is the one of whom Isaiah spoke.

Jesus is blessed from womb to manger and far beyond. He is beloved from the beginning. Thirty years ago, the late psychologist John Bradshaw wrote of Jesus: *Is it any wonder that Jesus of Nazareth turned out to be so well adjusted as he grew from birth, through infancy, through childhood, youth and on into adulthood? At his birth he was called "wonderful, counselor, mighty, king, prince of peace, a child full of grace and truth, savior of the world." His nickname was "God is with us!"*

When everyone close to him beheld him, he saw eyes of love and felt the warm, loving embrace of people who believed in him. Held tight at his parents' knees, he was affirmed and celebrated from the moment of birth by angels of God, poor shepherds and wealthy kings. Camels, cows, sheep and goats were there to welcome him. What a crowd of affirmation!

But there is a dark side to his arrival as well because narcissistic sociopathic demagogues are never once and done – they keep reappearing in history. Jesus is despised and hunted by Ahaz's

kingly successor, King Herod. “God is with Us” is forced to hide in Egypt after being taken through mountains and vast deserts on the journey from Bethlehem to Cairo. From his earliest days, Jesus was made aware of two realities he would face from the actions of love and the reactions of hate. He would be loved and celebrated by those who knew him and hunted by hateful rulers who saw him as a threat to their power.

By 12 years old, “God With Us” – Immanuel, Joshua, Jesus, Yesua (whatever name you call him) - this boy wonder could draw crowds of rabbis in the temple to learn wisdom at his feet, but he also intimately knew the shadow of the cross while working at Joseph’s side in the carpenter’s shop.

The prophet Isaiah and the angel of the Lord were right about this one. By the age of 2, Jesus was able to differentiate between good and evil. He was able to refuse and reject evil as a mode of operation. He was able to choose good as the path in his decision-making and actions. Perhaps All children, given loving, nurturing, attentive parents and supporters can stand in similar places at early ages. I believe they can. I have seen it happen time and time again.

How we encourage, support, nurture and love our children makes a huge difference in this world. If we look and speak to our children with the same words, spirit and unconditional love that Jesus saw, heard and felt during his earliest hours and growing up days, do you not believe it will lead them to be righteous, too?

Isaiah and Joseph were both courageous. Isaiah stood his ground against Ahaz. Joseph stood his ground on behalf of his adopted son, Jesus. And I would like to shout out to all the dads whose children are not biological but adopted and they love them just the same – all the same.

Courage is something we need more of in our world today. Real courage comes from sources and people who have a lot to lose by standing up and speaking out for what is right and opposing what is wrong. I have seen real courage from so many of you across so many years. You have spoken to situations and conditions which were wrong and thus made this world a better place. Thank you.

This week we have been offered two stories of two men who have been courageous in speaking truth to power. One is a writer, an editor to be exact and one is a farmer. One comes to us via film on the big screen and one come via the internet. One is named Mark and the other Franz. Both are courageous.

Mark Galli is not a name many of you know. He is the editor-in-chief of *Christianity Today* (CT), a magazine founded by Billy Graham in the 1950s to speak to and for Evangelicals. For almost 70 years, CT has provided a consistent and conservative evangelical voice for a wide range of (mostly) white evangelical Christians. This week, Mark Galli broke ranks. In an editorial that has gone viral, written on December 19th, Galli wrote an op-ed titled [“Trump Should Be Removed from Office,”](#) which [took off](#) on social media, briefly caused the magazine’s website to

crash. While Mr. Trump is very popular with white evangelicals, polling at over 80% support consistently, the readership of CT may take a huge hit. The editor-in-chief knew that when he wrote this op-ed. He knew his words could sink the monthly magazine. And of course, his op-ed drew an immediate and lamentably predictable response from Franklin Graham and the president who immediately tweeted that Galli was a captive of the ultra-left (which of course is not true).

I read Galli's op-ed. I encourage you to read it too. It isn't an attack. Galli concedes that the debate over impeaching and removing Trump is rife with partisanship. He declares that the Democrats have had it out for Trump for three years and he grants that reasonable minds can differ about whether impeachment or an election should decide Trump's political fate. He writes: *"But the facts in this instance are unambiguous: The president of the United States attempted to use his political power to coerce a foreign leader to harass and discredit one of the president's political opponents. That is not only a violation of the Constitution; more importantly, it is profoundly immoral."*

He points out that CT spoke clearly against the immorality of Bill Clinton in 1998 as well. In fact, the words used then line up closely to the words being used by Galli in this present moment. Mark Galli believes he is defending Christianity after years of its adherents' moral compromises in the realm of politics. On Friday, Galli [explained](#) his real mission: "As a Christian," he told CNN's John Berman, "I like to think of myself as a person who

has given my ultimate loyalty to Jesus Christ and the gospel he has called us to proclaim.”

It took a lot of moral courage for Mark Galli to speak out so clearly. I can tell you that many of my Evangelical pastor friends who heard this are (silently) defending Galli. Maybe they will find the courage to stand up in their pulpits and speak truth with love about this as well. We will see. Mark Galli showed us that courage can't wait.

Through a film released this week, “A Hidden Life,” we venture 80 years back in time to meet peasant farmer Franz Jägerstätter. Born and bred in the small village of St. Radegund, Austria, Franz is working his land when World War II breaks out. Married to Fani, the couple are important members of the tight-knit rural community. They live a simple life with the passing years marked by the arrival of the couple's three girls. Franz is called up to basic training and is away from his beloved wife and children for months. Eventually, when France surrenders and it seems the war might end soon, he is sent back from training. With his mother and sister-in-law Resie, he and his wife farm the land and raise their children amid the mountains and valleys of upper Austria.

As the war goes on, Jägerstätter and the other able-bodied men in the village are called up to fight. Their first requirement is to swear an oath of allegiance to [Adolf Hitler](#) and the [Third Reich](#). Despite pressure from his neighbors, who ostracize him and his family, Jägerstätter refuses. Wrestling with the knowledge that

his decision will mean arrest and even death, Jägerstätter finds strength in Fani's love and support. Jägerstätter is taken to prison, first in [Enns](#), then in [Berlin](#) and waits months for his trial. During his time in prison, he and Fani write letters to one another and give each other strength. Fani and their daughters are victims of growing hostility in the village over her husband's decision not to fight.

After months of brutal incarceration, his case goes to trial. He is found guilty and sentenced to death. Despite many opportunities to sign the oath of allegiance, Jägerstätter continues to stand up for his beliefs. He is beheaded by the Third Reich in August 1943, while his wife and three daughters survive.

Franz Jägerstätter is a martyr of our Christian faith – a witness against the evils of Hitler's Third Reich never to be forgotten. On October 26, 2007, Pope Benedict went to the Cathedral in Linz, Austria to commence the process of sainthood for Jägerstätter by his beautification. He is the embodiment of courage. Franz showed us that courage can't wait in the face of evil.

Each one of us is called by God to be courageous. Wherever you and I see injustice and unrighteousness in our times, let us be courageous. Through the conviction of your faith in Emmanuel, "God is with Us," be courageous.

Courage can't wait. May God grant you courage as you witness for our faith in ways and places where darkness seeks to reign.

And remember, from this day on, light is ascending. Thanks be to God. Amen.