

“Tell Only What You Hear and See”

Advent III

*Isaiah 35:1-10; James 5: 7-10; Matthew 11:2-11
 (“Living in the Moment” – Part III of VI)*

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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 III, December 11, 2016, dedicated to the memory of Harry D. Guynn, Jr., our newest members whom we joyfully welcome today, and Jack, Marion and Michael who entered eternal life in this past year and are still loved and missed by their beloved families and always to the glory of God!

“Tell Only What You Hear and See”

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(“Living in the Moment” – Part III of VI)

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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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He’s back! Once again, John the Baptist arrives in our text to oversee our Advent journey of repentance, forgiveness and redemption. But, in today’s text, our desert prophet is condemned unto death. John is in prison facing death by beheading. Now it is His time that is at hand. His ministry of

baptizing for the forgiveness of sins is near an end. So, John sends his disciples to Jesus to ask his cousin a question - "*Are you the One we've been expecting, or are we still waiting?*" (Mt. 11:3).

Jesus' answer sounds like an echo of the prophet Isaiah which we have heard this morning. 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. Do you hear the echo coming from 2500 years before as Isaiah proclaims: "*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.* (Isaiah 35:5-6)?"

But, Isaiah isn't finished. If human transformation is not enough, nature will be transformed as well. 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. They point to what we call in "theological terms" – a realized eschatology - a cleansed humanity and a vibrant earth.

In *the Divine Milieu*, Teilhard de Chardin, a paleontologist 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.

A New Earth is being slowly engendered! Amazing!

After speaking to the coming of Christ in the end of time and our call to be constantly part of the preparation in history, de Chardin 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).

Teilhard de Chardin reawakens within our short memory and limited view that we are actually heirs of God's Incarnation in the person of Jesus Christ. We are part of the illumination of God found in the center of the Universe! I feel like I should stop there. But, we are much more earthbound and found living in the moment of our despair with "the way things are" than the Cosmic Christ we are called to follow. We get stuck in the present moment and shake our heads or scream out loud when we struggle to make sense of senseless decisions by our national leaders or to figure out how to deal with illness, death, and even terror and destruction in our world. Honestly, it is

difficult to see what the Center of the Universe, the Divine Love of God, or the healer of humanity is doing right here and now. Clearly, the vastness of God's Universe has the ability to overwhelm the simplicity of our existence.

For example, you may say, *"I cannot make the lame leap for joy."* But, what can I do? I can be a physical therapist who helps a child stand or move her arms when devastated by disease from birth. I can help a man stand and walk following a terrible accident or after a stroke. You may not be a physical therapist, but you stretch a loved one's arms to heaven and put their legs to the earth when they are struggling to stand on their own. In this, we have connected to the all-embracing work of the Incarnation. These are **the sinews** of Incarnation! The movement of God!

You may say, *"I 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. I can give a child hope as he puts together his first sentence when others had sentenced him to a life of speechlessness. But, you don't need to be a speech therapist. You can share a new word, sound out joy for someone who has no one singing in their lives. Again, you have connected to the Incarnation. The synapses of God's Immense Universe have fired in your brain

and connected to the speech of one of God's beloved children!
This is **the voice** of Incarnation!

You may say, "*I cannot set the prisoner free.*" And yet, what can you do? You can join the men and women in this congregation and other congregations who 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!

You may say, "*I cannot bring good news to the poor.*" That is too overwhelming for me to consider. And yet, what can you do? You can bring a gift card to families at Gladden Community house who have nothing this holiday season. You can come and serve this year's Christmas dinner with Bethlehem on Broad Street. Through Good Samaritan Fund, you can guarantee that people stay in their homes this winter, find a way to work with COTA bus passes, and more. Our Faith Mission Team has invited the congregation to help prepare and serve meals on the last Friday of each month – you can do that. You can go to Laundry of Love in West Franklinton on the last Tuesday night of this month and every month and help struggling families share something you love – clean and dry clothes, sheets and towels.

You can advocate at the statehouse that funds for hungry children and the homeless poor are not cut any further – in fact you can fight for more money for the less, the lost and the forsaken. Through BREAD, you can be a reconciler of justice in the courts and schools. I love two ideas that have come from my Stewardship conversations in this congregation where two individuals who are blessed with a passion want to share it – Laura Baird is a skilled Pilates instructor and wants to do Pilates for those who have been gripped by the pain of the opiate crisis and another one of our Yoga instructors wants to do yoga and meditation with the homeless poor in downtown Columbus. Through these and many other ways, you can bring Good News to the Poor! You can be the just conscience and living presence of the Incarnation of God!

You 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, is nothing more than the

healing of 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 in our 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 went 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. This Nobel Peace Prize Winner has taken his message to Israel and Palestine; to Northern Ireland and Viet Nam, to Rwanda and the Sudan. Because Bishop 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 – he 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, for the poor to recognize and receive Good News we need to believe that we

are part of God's plan of Incarnation. In fact, we become "God with skin on" by living in this moment and becoming 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.

In Jesus' words, "tell John what you see and hear." If are not seeing or hearing God's healing at work in this world – then make it happen – now. You can be the Incarnational presence of God in this world. If you ARE seeing and hearing God's powerful healing and Incarnational presence and truth- that is Good News! Amen.

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