“When Angels Intervene”

Advent IV
Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
(“Living in the Moment” – Part VI of VI)

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

December 18, 2016

From the Pulpit
The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ
444 East Broad Street, Columbus, OH 43215
Phone: 614.228.1741 Fax: 614.461.1741
Email: home@first-church.org
Website: http://www.first-church.org
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 18, 2016, dedicated to my grandson Benton Myles Ahrens who is 18 months old on Christmas Day, to the memory of US Senator John H. Glenn, American Hero and lifelong Buckeye, to Annie, his wife of 73 years and to their family and always to the glory of God!

“When Angels Intervene”
Isaiah 7:10-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
(Part IV of VI in sermon series, “Living in the Moment”)

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.

This is a season seemingly owned by angels, elves and ghosts. Human and Heavenly Messengers are everywhere found trying to break through our apathy, fatigue, distain, disbelief and depression. They come in all sizes and shapes. In literature and film, their names range from Clarence and Kris Kringle to Buddy and Gabriel. Some are known only to us as The Ghosts of Christmas Past and Present and the Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. These messengers seize the season and
force to see things as they really are – or might become. But, they are not the first ones to drive home the story of God overcoming despair. When we read our Advent story closely, we discover they have been here all along in prophets and angels of old. Today, we meet two of their prophetic and angelic ancestors in the “message making business” in Isaiah and Matthew.

In Isaiah, the threat of war and a baby born to save the nation appear together as one complete prophecy from the lips of Isaiah to the ears of Ahaz. While we are trying to figure out how to finish our Christmas shopping and complete our mad dash to the manger of Bethlehem, God’s prophet and Judah’s king are going nose-to-nose about the presence of God and the meaning of good and evil. Although Isaiah proclaims that “all earth is hopeful,” the tiny territory of earth known as ancient Palestine is fearful- and facing a bloody makeover. Only a baby can save them.

In Isaiah 7, the king of Judah is facing a foreign policy crisis with his northern neighbors Israel (20 miles away) and Assyria (100 miles away). He is also engaged in a confrontation with his royal prophet, Isaiah. Political power and the power of God are engaged in this high stakes confrontation. Theirs is a confrontation between two competing security systems – one vested in God’s power and the other counting on military and kingly might. Isaiah warns Ahaz that the only way out of the
crisis is through faith in God. According to the prophet, faith in God – not military, diplomatic, or political power – will save the nation. No threats, no weapons, no army will save the king from his enemies – only God can save the king and his people.

To prove his point, Isaiah invites the king to test both God and the prophet to see if he indeed speaks God’s truth. But the king refuses to listen to the defiant offer of the prophet, ironically quoting scripture to claim “you can’t test the Lord your God” (Deuteronomy 6:6). Deep down inside, King Ahaz knows if he is wrong and Isaiah is right. Ahaz knows he will have to change his strategic policies and military plans of action and follow the way of the prophet. By remaining wrapped in his narcissistic reality, Ahaz cuts himself off from God’s prophet, and, by implication, he cuts himself off from God. He drowns in his own ego.

All along, Ahaz has wanted to be autonomous. The king has wanted to be free of God and the God’s messenger – Isaiah. His request is granted. He is on his own. He has played his last card and his king card doesn’t trump the ace that the prophet of God is holding!

But all of the sudden, out of the blue, Isaiah offers a “sign” from God, a plan for God’s salvation. He says, “God will save the people with a baby.” He continues, “A young woman will bear a son and his name will be Immanuel – which means
“God is with Us.” Then he adds, “Before the child knows how to refuse evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted” (Isaiah 7:16).

That sounds like good news until Isaiah bursts Ahaz’s fantasy balloon with this terrifying addition, “Oh, one more thing. . . the king of Assyria is coming here!” In other words, his enemy’s lands will be deserted because the most ruthless, brutal, massive and unstoppable army is coming full force into Judah and feasting on the carcass of Ahaz in Jerusalem!

**What a choice.** On the one hand, you can prepare to die at the hands of your worst enemy. On the other hand, you can turn your kingdom over to a yet-to-be born savior simply named “God With Us.” **So, tell me more about this baby...**

This baby is not some odd, fanciful diaper-covered placeholder between the confrontation of prophet and king and destruction of the kingdom. This baby is, in fact, “the reason for this season.” For the season that Ahaz is facing and for the season that we are facing, **the baby is everything.** Before the child is 2 – which is the developmental time frame in the ancient world when a child was believed to be able to differentiate between refusing evil and choosing good – Ahaz’s world will be rocked.

**Let us breathe in this truth.** We cannot miss what Isaiah just said. Before the child is 2, he is able to know the difference between good and evil. He will refuse evil. He will
choose good. Think of a child you know who is in his first 24 months of life. Ask yourself, “Is this child really able to differentiate between good and evil?” (I may point out – grandparents may answer this differently than parents!)

Be careful how you answer this question. Remember - this child has been watching and learning the ins and outs of life from all those around him or her since coming down the dark birth canal and entering the light of day. This child has been soaking in words, facial expressions, voice tones, the touch of hands, the kiss of lips, the nuances of feelings, reactions and interactions between parents. He has been watching the world in his growing field of vision. She has been listening to the 2016 election cycle, hearing about the destruction of Syria, watching the news of a growing opiate crisis in central Ohio and America and taking in the world around her. The little ones have been paying attention to our reactions and interactions with the world around us.

So, all the tastes, smells, sights, sounds and touch embodied and expressed in the past 24 months are not lost on this child. Since every person’s memory can be stored in every cell of our bodies, this child has already taken into her or his bones millions of tiny interactions through the feelings of the few who live and relate so close at hand.

The baby is everything in our story today.
Isaiah is not the only messenger about the birth of babies to save the world. In Matthew, 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. But, 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. Psychologist John Bradshaw has written 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! There was dark side to his arrival as well. He was despised and hunted by Ahaz’s kingly successor, Herod. “God With Us” was forced to hide in Egypt after being taken through vast deserts. From his earliest days, Jesus was made aware, from the actions of love and the reactions of hate, that he would be celebrated and hunted; spoken to with words of love and hunted by the hateful.

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 a similar place at an early age. How we encourage, support, nurture and love our children makes a huge difference in this world. f 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?

What if we transferred this practice of love to one another? What if our faces beamed the light of God and we saw each other as “God is with us” every time we looked lovingly into the eyes of our partners, our spouses, our loved ones, our children, our extended family members, our neighbors, our co-workers, and on around the globe to our sisters and brothers in other faiths, even our enemies and those we (supposedly) despise? If we have not received these affirmations in our own lives, perhaps we need to begin find words that work for us and speak them to ourselves before speaking them to others.

What would happen if we saw “God is with us” in everyone? EVERYONE. Is it really so hard to do this? Is it so hard to live into Isaiah’s prophecy that the one who is coming will “refuse evil and choose good?” Perhaps the one who is coming is right in front of our eyes – or right beside us this morning – to our left, to our right.

Let’s not be like King Ahaz, filled-up with our own sense of power and narcissistic self-adoration and be unable to see the one who is coming right in front of our eyes. Ultimately, the Ahazs of the world have no power, for they fail to see God right before their eyes. Rather, let us be like Mary and Joseph and look lovingly into one another’s eyes and see the light of God there. Let us laugh, live and love the baby, as Jesus’
mother did. Let us refuse to do evil. Let us choose to do good. And let us do so remembering that our clocks are ticking. We only have a sliver of time to make a world of difference. In 24 months, the die is cast.

**Remember, the baby is everything.** May “God be with us” – each of us – as we move with haste and purpose to the manger of Bethlehem. May we be aware in these waning days of Advent that intervening angels are everywhere. Pay attention. Watch and listen. One may be sitting beside you in a shape, size and presence you never imaged would end up bringing you a message from God for your life. Amen.

Copyright 2016, First Congregational Church, UCC