

# “The World In Silence”

Part VI of VI in the sermon series,  
“The Advent/Christmas Conspiracy”  
Isaiah 9:2-7; Titus 2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20

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From the Pulpit

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A Christmas Eve Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2015, 11:00pm service, dedicated to the Syrian Orthodox Church, to all the children of the world tonight who live in terror as refugees and orphans of war and hate, to the Choirs of First Church under the direction of Sandy Mathias and Kevin Jones and all the wondrous music of the season they have brought to us and to Jamie Bobb who joins us tonight on the organ and always to the glory of God!

*“The World in Silence”*

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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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Early in the year, 37A.D., the Apostle Peter climbed across the Golan Heights arrived in Antioch and brought Christianity to Syria. Jesus of Nazareth had been crucified, dead, buried, resurrected and ascended for less than four years when Peter ventured forth. Upon his arrival, many Syrians received the blessings of Christian faith – joy hope, peace, love, mercy, justice and grace – and embraced this new faith as their own. The church in Antioch and throughout Syria grew and thrived and played a significant role in the formation and growth of Christianity. The first worship service of the church was composed by St. James, the brother of Jesus and the patriarch of the church in Jerusalem and used in Syria beginning in 60 A.D. Our prayer forms, baptismal liturgies, rituals and theology of early days are found and grounded in the Syrian Orthodox Church.

1978 Christmases have come and gone since then. On Christmas Eve 2015, the Syrian Orthodox Church and the nation of Syria lies in ruins. Most churches are empty or in the afflicted people of God are worshipping in the rubble of ruin. **Since the “Arab Spring” in 2011**, a civil war has brought devastation to Syria. At least 11 million Syrians have been displaced from their homes, villages and cities. At least 4 million are refugees – close to 2 million in Turkey alone. As many as one million more are dead – 80% of

them at the hands of their President [Bashar al-Assad's](#) government forces. While we at First Church have taken offerings and made overtures to receive refugees, the escalating crisis seems to have no end – especially since ISIS now controls half the country in the eastern regions of Syria.

As we gather in “the peace of the newborn Christ,” our sisters and brothers in one of our most ancient and once glorious churches in Syria have no peace. Their Muslim neighbors and friends have no peace as well. The solemn silence of Christians across the globe kneeling at the foot of the manger is drown out by the cries of those who seek to reclaim the peace that is granted by God. In the midst of this terror and mounting suffering, we cry with them – half a world away.

Tonight we are connected to Syria by our Christmas Story – which actually begins in the palace of Governor Quirinius. We read, “When Quirinius was Governor of Syria” he issued the edict for a census to be taken. This meant that every household from the King David’s extended family – as well as every other household from all the tribes of Israel – had to go the hometown of their namesake. For the relatives of King David, this was especially challenging as they all made their way to Bethlehem, “the city of David” – because David’s Line was jam-packed with other kings, other rulers and a ton of leaders in the nation living under

the boot of Rome's rule. Almost like concentration camps, this herding of Jewish families was dangerous for all of them. They were being counted so they could be controlled and eventually taxed more heavily.

In Jesus' time – as in ours – the powers of the world were acting upon citizens who didn't want to be herded into camps, treated like numbers, and registered or stamped as anything or with someone else's number. Can you sense parallels to the herding and hurting of people in our times?

People in power or seeking power say and mean things like this:

“We will build huge walls to keep people out.”

“We will keep certain people in and certain people out!”

“We will register people we don't like. Anyone who fits a category of disliked persons or groups will be under surveillance and suspicion and judgment.”

“We will send people we don't like back to where they came from.”

“If they don't look like us, we will hurt them for looking different.”

“If they don't have our religion, our skin color our accents, or sexual orientation or political bent or “fill in the blank” – we will herd them and hurt them.”

This must sound familiar to you.

We don't have to return to the Syrian Governor Quirinius to find comparisons to current day Syria or the circumstances of herding and hurting people around the world. We only have to look around our own country in our own times. These attitudes and actions hit all too close to home.

We cannot be silent in such a world as this. Lutheran pastor Martin Niemöller became famous after the reign of Hitler and the Third Reich for saying these words.

*First they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Socialist.*

*Then they came for the Trade Unionists, and I did not speak out—*

*Because I was not a Trade Unionist.*

*Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out—  
Because I was not a Jew.*

*Then they came for me—and there was no one left to speak for me.*

Even more powerful, but almost lost to history, are Pastor Niemöller's words about his own anti-Semitism. In 1946, he was one of the first German Christians to confess his sins against his Jewish brothers and sisters – the effect of which cost the lives of 6 million Jews in the Holocaust.

He said, "... *Whenever I chance to meet a Jew known to me before, then, as a Christian, I cannot but tell him: 'Dear Friend, I stand in front of you, but we cannot get together, for there is guilt between us. I have sinned and my people has sinned against thy people and against thyself.'*"

Perhaps like Pastor Niemoller, we are silent because we actually harbor feelings that align with those acting out unjustly. So we need to face these deep-seeded feelings, because "A World in Silence" at times such as these becomes an ever more dangerous world. In the world in silence in First Century Palestine was born a child who would change the balance of power forever. He would grow to stand with people in their pain. He would change the world around him through healing and helping – completely opposite of the herding and hurting mentality of empire and the powerful in his times. He was present and living with people one-on-one. But, he was just as strong speaking out in a world which wanted him silenced.

If you and I dare come to the cattle's feed trough tonight, we must come singing out, speaking out, and stepping out in faith in the world which wants silence in the face of power. Like Pastor Niemoller we would be wise to confess the places and the people we have turned away from and sinned against by our inaction and silence. **We needn't**

wallow is guilt at the cattle's feed trough where the baby has been laid. Our Savior, born low this night, doesn't want wallowing followers. But, as we look into the face of the baby born in Bethlehem whose entire life was given in love for all of us and each of us, we should be honest. We should be clear. We should own the places and times we have not looked and seen those in need who stand right before us. The world and our sisters and brothers from Main St. in Antioch, Syria to East Broad in Columbus, Ohio are waiting for us to break the silence and respond in love. A world in silence must awaken and sing to God songs of love and justice for the Babe, the Son of Mary. Once awakened we can our voices and our very lives to change the world. Amen.

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