

“Salvation to All People”

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

Christmas Eve 11 p.m. Service

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From the Pulpit

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A Christmas Eve Meditation delivered by the Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2017, 11p.m. dedicated to my mother, Lorene Kellermeyer Ahrens and to the memory of my mother-in-law, Dr. Ruth Lowe Sitler and my uncle, Dr. David Mathias Kellermeyer who passed to eternal life this year, to Theodore William Kruk, born to David and Sarah on December 19 and to the 25 people we baptized into Christ this year 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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I have seen this face before. After laboring day and night, and birthing her son into the world in the early hours of daylight, I looked into the eyes of this first-time mother for the first time. Looking back, I saw exhaustion, exhilaration, fright, and hope. I saw eyes filled with love and fury – yes - love AND fury.

The love is a love like none other. Her love is boundless, hopeful and expectant. Her fury, like Mary singing out to God in the Magnificat, expresses protection, defense and the rising voice of justice for her child and for all children.

A mother is born when a child is born. She holds her newborn like his life and hers depend on it. Both lives are intertwined with inter-dependency and love. A mother's love is something that is immeasurable and yet, a mother's love clearly determines the future of one life – the life in her hands.

Dana Lewis is a mother who carries such love and fury. Dana Lewis is one of Time Magazine's persons of the year for 2017. Her words reflect her powerful love for her daughter. Along with 56 other women and four men, Dana was one of 62 people Time celebrated for speaking out about sexual harassment this year.

Dana is one of seven women employees who are plaintiffs in the lawsuit against New York's Plaza Hotel. She continues to work at the Plaza while she goes through the lawsuit. She says, *"I am a single mother. I have an 11-year-old daughter and she is depending on me. My entire life revolves around her. I wasn't really left with the option of leaving. I'm not left with the option of giving up. I want to show her that's OK to stand up for yourself. If you keep fighting, eventually you'll see the sun on the*

other side” (Time Magazine, December 17, 2017, “Person of the Year,” p. 41).

Mary of Nazareth could relate to Dana of New York. Her life revolved around her son. She didn't have the option of giving up. She showed him from his birth to his death that she would fight for him. She always defended her baby boy. Following his birth in a barn, she carried him from the manger in Bethlehem to the sanctuary city of Cairo, Egypt. She walked through the wilderness deserts with him back to Nazareth and eventually all the way to the cross. She followed him from the empty tomb in Jerusalem to the seaside of Galilee where, as the Risen Christ, he showed the world what salvation looks like. Mary was forever a prophet and a witness for her Savior Son. Like Mary, Dana has been a prophet, too. Mothers standing together across time to bring justice in the face of injustice and cruelty.

Tonight, we come to kneel beside our first-time mother, her firstborn son and her betrothed, Joseph the Carpenter. This 14-year-old first time mother does not have her mother or and midwife with her. There are no doctors, no birthing room, no epidural. Filled with love and fury, Mary births her baby into the carpenter's hands. Animals and angels look on. And as beautiful as God's beloved son appears, he is birthed like every other child before him and most that have followed. And his

mother Mary bears all the pain and joy of every other mother before and after. Yes, this child is special, but he doesn't look different entering the world. He has no halo. He is born with the blessing that every child of God bears – the blessing of life and hope.

Our Savior is born low. And that is where the power of our story begins. It is found in lowliness. It is found in humility. This child who becomes The Savior of the world, has a simple and inauspicious entry into the world. The one who is born “bringing salvation to all people” (Titus 2:11) enters our world with simplicity and grace.

In his birth, we come face-to-face with this truth about the salvation he brings to all people. He comes to save the world – which means bringing us from blindness to sight; from death to life; from infirmity to well-being; from fear to trust; from injustice to justice; from violence to peace.

Salvation is about personal transformation and the transformation of the world. Salvation is both/and not either/or. Salvation can be experienced as healing—a salve – a healing ointment. Salvation is about how we live our lives on this side of heaven. 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.**

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.

We live in the here and now.

We hear the voices of salvation calling to us from our texts of Holy Scripture. Isaiah talks about the shattering of the yoke that burdens the oppressed. He says *“Every warrior’s boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire.”* (Isaiah 9:5). That is here and now. Titus declares that we are to be educated so that we can live sensible, ethical and godly lives right now **“by rejecting the ungodly lives and desires of this world”** (Titus 2:12). That is here and now. And Luke is all about the here and now of salvation as he tells us the unfolding story of a homeless newborn laid in the cattle feed trough visited by poor shepherds – who by the world’s standards then and now – were seen as the lowliest of the low – accounting for little in this world. In other words, we follow

a child born low, laid low, and visited by the lowliest of God's beloved ones.

God is crying out to us to pay attention to salvation and transformation in our lives through humility and standing with the poor. But, more than anything else, God is calling us tonight to love as Mary loves, as a first-time mother loves – with love and fury. First, love unconditionally - with everything that is within you. Second, love with a fury that protects and defends the defenseless among us.

Love is at the center of Salvation. So, 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. 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. Let us approach the manger with the deep love and fury of Mary, our first-time mother. Let us approach the manger with the spirit of Dana Lewis, with no option of giving up. May the one who brings salvation to all people transform our hearts and minds tonight. Amen.

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