

“God with Skin on”

Jeremiah 23:1-6, Colossians 1:11-20, Luke 23:33-43

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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, the Reign of Christ, November 24, 2019, dedicated to the 750 men, women and children who were here when I arrived at First Church, to the 1167 men, women and children who have joined our community of faith since November 21, 1999, to the 192 who have been born here, to the 519 who have been baptized here, to the 503 couples who have been married here, to the 145 teens who confirmed their faith in Christ here and to the five who chose not to, to the 190 members who have passed to eternal life, to over 2,000 sermons I have been blessed to prepare and preach here, to the \$2.5 million we have sent in mission to serve others and most of all, I dedicate this to my wife and life partner, Susan E. Sitler who has walked through every single day and night with me here, to my children, their beloved ones, my two grandsons 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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It was 10 p.m. on a chilly Autumn evening in 2001 when I first met Dale Griffith. “Power,” as he preferred to be called, had come to the 9th Street entrance seeking help. Unlike others who come late at night, “Power’s” request was quite different. He did not ask for money, a ride, a bus pass, food, or any handout of any kind. He simply wanted me to call the police.

“Power” was sleeping under the shelter of our Broad Street entrance - next to the front doors, beneath the chiseled words, ***“Enter to Worship Depart to Serve.”*** He asked if I could tell the police that it was okay for him to sleep there. I agreed to call them. Although I offered him food, drink and blankets, he politely declined. Instead he asked what time he could return in the morning to work for the church. He desired to work as a thanksgiving to us for our kindness, not for pay. When I questioned, *“Power, why our front steps? Why do you sleep in the floodlights and noise of Broad Street?”* He answered, *“Because I feel safe in the light. I feel safe in the shelter of God's house.”*

The next morning, Power arrived early to begin caring for First Church. On his first day of work, he raked up 22 bags of leaves in 1 ½ hours. Natalie Wright bought Power a pair of gloves to protect his hands from the coming cold. When Jeff Gallagher gave them to Power, he returned them encouraging Jeff to give them to someone who was really in need. Having been abused and even shot in the stomach by his cocaine-addicted father at 13, Power hated to be touched and trusted very few people.

In the weeks that followed, it became clear that even the floodlights and shelter of our cathedral stone could not provide what he really needed. Yet, he declined homeless shelters and even offers of other housing. One night, carrying his graceful, yet troubled life and his servant spirit with him, Power disappeared onto the streets of Columbus. I have never seen Power again since those weeks in October nineteen years ago. I pray for Power whenever I leave the church late at night.

Bathed in God's light and sheltered by God's love, First Church has sought to serve Christ in the heart of this great city for over 167 years. Although the mason's chisel has whittled in stone a command to worship and serve, we have, at times, fallen short of both worship and service. Nevertheless, by the grace of God, God has blessed us through the years with "Power" and other angels like him who call us to ways of justice and mercy.

Today, after the trumpets have been quieted, the organ has been silenced and each of us has departed to serve, "Power" will remain with us - in word and in deed - calling us to hear the word of God and respond – because *God is still speaking*. And I pray, we are still listening and responding in prayerful actions of love and justice every day in every imaginable way.

I think of "Power" often. Since the night we first met, God has blessed me time and time again with the presence of men, women and children who have shined God's light in my life. They have been for me a presence of **"God with skin on."**

In varied and remarkable ways, each of you in this room today have shined God's light in my life in ways you may not know, but in ways for which I am deeply grateful each day. Thank you. I have said it through the years, being the Senior Minister of First Church is like being a pearl diver. Every single time I dive and crack open the pearl shells that are your outer coverings, I see your beauty and giftedness, the ways in which God is in you. And when I dive even deeper into our relationships, I discover more gifts and more beauty in you than I ever imagined possible. Each one of you is a pearl of God's priceless creation and I am blessed to count each of you as part of my life. Thank you.

I believe power, particularly, God's Power, is always with us. God's power is never in short supply - although at times we do not feel it, see it, touch it, claim it, receive it or share it with others. That is on us. We cannot blame God for that. God's power is always there. It is always accessible to each of us. What matters is how we open the shells which encase God's power and unleash the beauty of God's creation and God's presence in our lives.

On this Reign of Christ Sunday, it is significant to consider that God comes to us (in the words of our UCC Statement of Faith) "to share our Common Lot." God comes, as Jesus the Christ. God comes "with Skin On." In Christ Jesus we witness an incarnational encounter with the rabbi of Nazareth who teaches, preaches, heals, performs miracles and transforms unjust people and power structures, turning the world upside down in the time he was given to walk the earth. He shows us that our "God with

skin on” is compassionate, kind, merciful, just, loving and trustworthy and patient. “God with skin on” has a great sense of humor, a deep sense of right and wrong and a clear sense of what really matters in this world.

But Jesus Christ was much more than this. He was also our Risen Savior. In case you weren’t aware, Rising from the dead is hard to do. The UCC once had an ad campaign which proclaimed, *“If you think it’s hard to get up on Sunday morning, try rising from the dead.”* **We all know that only God can raise the dead.** Our faith informs us that this happens in our Christ’s story. And rising from the dead is glorious, powerful and transformational. I believe with my whole heart that Christ rose from the dead and reigns with God in glory. I have believed this since I was a young child – and belief that settled in my soul at the age of nine at the funeral of my grandfather, Rev. Hugo Kellermeyer at Grace United Church of Christ, Canton, Ohio.

My belief in the real presence of the Risen Christ and his physical resurrection has only grown since childhood as I have witnessed resurrection throughout my life. I have seen so many resurrections in this congregation, alone. Some of you were given up for dead, but our God of Resurrection Joy had other plans for you. You are here because resurrection is real. Don’t get me going on this one because we will be here all day and the food will get cold!

In Colossians, Paul, an apostle of Christ writes to Timothy his brother in Christ and all the saints and faithful brothers and

sisters of Christ in Colossae. It doesn't take Paul long to get wound up. By the 11th verse, Paul is singing a **“Hymn to Christ,”** as Dr. Amy Jill-Levine and Rabbi Marc Brettler call it in *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*. Paul writes to his beloved and persecuted sisters and brothers in Timothy's church. Paul sings to them of Christ's kingship and power. Christ is presented as *“the image of the invisible God”* (vs. 15). He is *“the firstborn of all creation”* - not the first thing to be created, but rather the one with preeminent rank in creation. He is God's agent in creation – *“for in him all things on heaven and earth were created”* (vs. 6). Before all things came into being, Christ was present (vs. 17). And *“in him all things hold together”* (vs.17).

It's as though Jesus Christ is the super glue that holds together our family pictures in the ever-aging photo album of our Christian story! While the rubber cement of yesteryear may cause the disintegration of former photos, Christ glues all things together! Nothing can fall apart with the power of his hold on people. He is *“the head of the body, the church”* (vs. 18). As head over all creation, he is not only the firstborn of creation, but also the firstborn from the death (vs. 18). *“In him,”* Paul writes, *“God is in all God's fullness chose to dwell”* (vs. 18). And Paul declares, *“Reconciliation comes through him”* (vs. 20). On the cross, described by Luke's gospel account today, love wins! Peace is made between God and the world. We are filled with hope in the midst of power and presence. That is why we declare this day as the Reign of Christ Sunday!

Where does Paul come up with all of these glorious descriptions of “God with Skin on”? In Levine and Brettler’s Jewish reflections on the New Testament they write: *“down through the ages, the sages speculated about the preexistence of the Torah, the identity of the Messiah and a number of other cornerstones of Jewish.”* In Genesis Rabbah 1.1.4, it is written, *“six things preexisted before the creation of the world.”* The sages go on. One of the six things that preexisted before the creation of the world was the Messiah (*The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, editors, Amy Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, p. 410). I thank the sages of Judaism for pointing us to this ancient truth of the Messiah in the pre-existence of creation.

You see, there has been a yearning for the presence of “God with skin on” since the creation of the world. How amazing is that? The image of God who is relational, relatable, personal and accessible to us is more than 5780 years old. We all yearn for love and grace. We all yearn for understanding and compassion.

We need a God of love, not hate; a God of embrace, not rejection. We need a God who forgives and never mocks. We need a God who defends ALL Creatures great and small, not a God who could care less about creation and the balance of life on this planet. In our “God with skin on” we have the presence of God who holds all things together. This God is the loving, living superglue for reconciliation and love for humanity and creation.

We who call ourselves “followers of Christ,” claiming Christ as our light and love, must ground ourselves in his healing grace. We must live lives that reflect his love and grace. If we don’t our hypocrisy will cast a vast shadow on his light.

Remember the one who loves all pays close attention to those beyond our faith – especially those with NO Faith claims whatsoever. They become our teachers and our witnesses to the truth of our own faithful calling to LOVE! At the foot of the cross in Mark’s Gospel, just after Jesus’ last breath and just before his bloodied body is taken down to be laid in the tomb, the non-believing Roman Centurion guard proclaims, “*This man was innocent! He was a good man, and innocent!*” (*The Message*).

I don’t think we should brag about the reign of Christ or call Jesus King with any sense of pride or any sense that this belief makes us better than anyone else. After all, we are not kings or queens. We are not rulers of the universe. Rather, we are those who need to humbly kneel, clearly confess our sins and if we have breath left in us **whisper thanksgiving** to Jesus for the opportunity to merely live in the shadow of the cross. Like the Centurion, we need acknowledge the truth of Jesus. But, once we have, we need to ask forgiveness for all the times we have failed to reflect his love, light, and life in the way we carry ourselves as he followers.

By the grace of God, you and I may be able to say as “Power” did 19 years ago, “*I am here because I feel safe in the light. I feel safe in the shelter of God's house.*” Then, we need to rise and shine God’s

light in this world. Simply put – we need to “*enter to worship and depart to serve.*” It’s that simple. It’s that hard. May God bless and keep you as you enter to worship and depart to serve each and every day. Amen.