

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>

*“Remembering More than our
Sins... forever”*

*Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians
1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37*

November 30, 2014

By The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

A Baptismal Meditation delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr. Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent I, November 30, 2014, dedicated to the memory of Merilee Schneider and Michael Morris and to Zaria Celeste Hamilton and Nolan Christopher Kirkland on their baptismal day, to the memory of Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and all young people of color who have been gunned down on American streets by law enforcement officers and always to the glory of God!

“Remembering More than our Sins... forever”

*Isaiah 64:1-9; I Corinthians 1:3-9; Mark 13:24-37
(Part I of VI in the Advent/Christmas sermon series)*

++++
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.

++++

I need to know something before I share my message this morning.

How many of you are **actually awake**? Seriously (because Jesus is being pointedly serious) - how many of you are awake? Watching out? Paying attention? Taking care of yourself and the world around you? Despite your fears, despite the hostility and violence you see and experience around you, how many of you are “alive, awake, alert, and enthusiastic?”

As we launch into Advent today, we cannot be deceived by Christmas mall music and even the beautiful wreathes on our sanctuary walls – as beautiful as they are. We do not begin with “comfort and joy.” We begin with “despair and desperation.” We begin in total darkness. The arrival of the Light of the World is weeks away.

This is a message for the spiritually mature delivered at a time when we want to hold onto, cuddle and rock the baby in the manger (or one of the beautiful babies in our pews). So, if you are coming to church for the first time in a while, or have never been here before, welcome to the wild ride of Advent! Hold onto your faith. It will be shaken like a glass snow globe before our ride is over. To quote Dorothy, we are not in Kansas anymore. To quote Santa, this doesn't look like the North Pole. To quote Jesus, “WAKE UP! It is Advent!”

To get to Christmas we must go through Isaiah and Mark and the land of John the Baptizer. It is a barren land where one must look hard for desert flowers. Today alone, the prophet Isaiah speaks of destruction; the apostle Paul speaks of growing divisions in the church, and Jesus speaks of the end of the world as we know it. Humankind has reached the end of its rope. All our schemes and neat ideas for extricating ourselves from the traps we have set for ourselves have come to nothing. We cannot save ourselves. Without God, there will be no saving going down.

This season of Advent strips us down to bare essentials and forces us to begin again. Is it any wonder that we want to get to our Christmas carols and good tidings of comfort and joy? By the end of our Advent boot camp, we will find ourselves in the embrace of Christmas – in a new beginning – a place where hope comes out of seeming hopelessness, where yearnings for God have brought us face-to-face with our maker, and where new songs are sung in a world gone wrong.

Isaiah kicks us the season with a prayer. “Spoken by a people who are powerless and under oppression, Isaiah’s prayer lifts up the two main features of Advent hope. On the one hand, there is *a deep sense of desperation* about a situation out of control is sounded. On the other hand, *a bold and confident trust in God* is given voice to a God who

can (and will?) intervene to make life peace able and joyous. Life without God is unbearable. That is the present tense of Isaiah's prophecy. Moreover, life with God can be completely transformed – which is the urgent hope of a future tense (Walter Brueggemann, in Texts for Preaching, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1993, p. 2).

While Isaiah points out the fire and destruction growing out of the unfaithfulness of God's people, the passage pivots on “**we attah**,” which is Hebrew for “**nevertheless**.” He introduces God to us in three staggering indicatives - in spite of all sins and failings, God is found in the “nevertheless.” Isaiah says, “You are our Father, you are our potter and we are the work of your hands.” As potter and father, as Creator of all, Isaiah cries to God not to destroy those who have been so unfaithful. He cries out, “*don't hold our sins against us forever!*”

In Mark 13:24-37, Jesus shifts the narrative of earlier chapters and verses from healing, teaching and preaching to waking up, paying attention and watching out. The shift is dramatic, apocalyptic and mythic in proportion. At the same time, it is subtle, too. Like Isaiah, the conversation pivots on one word. While Isaiah's pivotal word is “nevertheless,” Jesus' word in Mark is “*see!*”

Jesus says the signs are coming of the end that is at hand. While there is no way to anticipate the time or the signs of the end, you can keep your eyes open. Throughout the Gospel of Mark, the author uses the word *“Blepo”* to an eye opening and ready for prime time faith. *“Blepo”* means you are watching out. It is a kind of spiritual discernment for where you are and what you see. *“Blepo”* protects a disciple from being misled by external appearances.

But, suddenly and subtly, the verb changes to *“Gregoreo”* – which means *“to see something different so you act in a new way.”* So, now the disciple of Christ must not simply stand and watch for the return of the Lord, but must act a completely different way *prior to the return of the master*. What was spiritual perception (*“Blepo”*) must lead directly to faithful behavior (*“Gregoreo”*).

In other words, **“get your act together!”** How many of us are messing things up in our own lives by our own actions? How many of us are angry or out of sorts and just keep acting that way? How many of us are in “a bad space” right now – a space we can move out of us if we simply choose to move?

In Mark, Jesus is on the edge of his trial and crucifixion when he speaks these words. He is not a baby in a manger. He is a man facing death on a cross. He tells his disciples to stop being babies and start being mature men and women of faith.

Wake up! Grow up! “Man up!” “Woman up!” Sober up. Step up! Turn your life around – NOW! “Get your act together!”

As I stand and deliver this message today, I do so with fear and trembling. From way up high in this box, I do so knowing that these words cut to my just as they cut to yours. I feel like these are words for every one of us. I also feel like they words we don't like to hear. They are words we need to hear. They are also words our nation needs to hear.

While Ferguson was burning on Monday night (including The Flood Christian Church where Michael Brown Sr. had come to faith in Jesus and into the water of baptism just days before his son was shot to death), I couldn't help but wonder what Jesus would SEE and say and do.

First, he would tell us to stop being racist and to start being the home of the free and the land of the brave. Second, he would demand that we start being a nation of inclusion not a series of the narrow-visioned municipalities

of which allow for separation and segregation. Third, he would tell us to welcome the outsiders and find a way to integrate them into our lives and society. He would tell us to wake up – to get our act together!

In the words of a pastoral letter from the Rev. Allen Fluent Acting Conference Minister of the Missouri/Mid-South Conference of the United Church of Christ as he wrote to the churches for which he cares last Tuesday morning:

Beloved, we need a brand new truth! We need something better than a grand jury truth, better than an assumption that real justice can be rendered in a setting where privilege and disadvantage go unremedied and unseen, better than all the efforts to find someone to blame. There is great sorrow for the death of Michael Brown in Ferguson, but the greater sorrow is for the many young men who live today in hopelessness, because their future is bleak in the cities of America; and the greater sorrow is neighborhood businesses destroyed by a rage that is nurtured in people convinced that they have no place, and nothing to lose, within the economy of their urban setting; and the greater sorrow includes as well those law enforcement officers who walk fearful in their neighborhoods, because they are assigned to patrol hostile streets where they do not live, that are created by years of social neglect.

First there was a moment of death that became a symbol, then the appearance of regarding it as nothing; then the anger; then the blaming; then the usual official reaction; then the protest and more blaming; then the verdict; then the fire and the looting; then the endless interpretations. Now we need a brand new truth. We need to be a part of it.

(Quoting from Mark 13:24 and 26, he continues...)

"After that suffering... Then they will see... May it be so.

It is true. We need a new brand of truth. We need to confess our sins – sins of racism, economic inequalities and shrinking lack of opportunity for those born black or born on the wrong side of the tracks. We need to confess our divisions which keep us from God and one another. We need a new brand of truth growing out of suffering. We need to See! Now is the season to wake up and to see. So, let us open our eyes. Amen.

Copyright 2014, First Congregational Church, UCC