

A baptismal meditation delivered by the Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, senior minister at the First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, Advent 4, December 19, 2010, dedicated to Finnegan Marc Vincent Miller on his baptismal day and to all the new members who join our church family at Christmas time to journey together in faith, and always to the glory of God!

“Refuse Evil; Choose Good”

Isaiah 7: 10-16; Matthew 1:18-25

**(Part IV of VI in sermon series
“All Earth is Hopeful”)**

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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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The rumors of war and newborn saviors greet us this morning in the prophecy of Isaiah. While we are trying to figure out how, when and where to finish our 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 all earth is hopeful, the tiny territory of this earth located in ancient Palestine is fearful and facing a bloody makeover. We are told the only thing that can save them is a baby.

As the seventh chapter of Isaiah opens, 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. Essentially, theirs is a confrontation

between two competing security systems – one vested in God, the other in military and kingly might. The prophet Isaiah warns the king that the only way out of the crisis is through faith in God. He says, 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 this, 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, he will have to change his strategic policies and military plans of action and follow the way of the prophet. By remaining headstrong, Ahaz cuts himself off from God's prophet, and, by implication, he cuts himself off from God.

All along, Ahaz has wanted to be autonomous. Now 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!

Then 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 seems like good news until Isaiah bursts the fantasy balloon of his (now) autonomous king with these terrifying words, "(Oh, one more thing. . . the king of Assyria is coming!" In other words, his enemy's lands will be deserted because the most ruthless, brutal, massive and beyond resistance army will be feasting on the carcass of Ahaz in Jerusalem!

What a choice. Give in to a baby or prepare to die at the hands of your worst enemy? 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. 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 approaching 24 months. Ask yourself, “Is this child able to differentiate between good and evil?” Be careful how you answer this question, remembering that 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.

So, all the feelings, 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.

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 their loving, warm embrace. Held tight at his parents’ knees, he was affirmed and celebrated from the moment of birth by angels, the poor shepherds and the wealthy kings. Camels, cows, sheep and goats were there to welcome him. What a crowd of affirmation!

Nevertheless, he also was despised and hunted by Ahaz’s kingly successor, Herod. He was forced to hide in Egypt after being taken through vast deserts. From his earliest days, Jesus was made aware, from the words of love and the reactions to hate, that he would be celebrated and hunted; treated with love and spoken of with words that destroyed. We know by 12 years old, he could draw crowds of rabbis in the temple to learn of his young wisdom, but he also intimately knew the shadow of the cross while working at Joseph’s side in the carpenter’s shop.

I believe the prophet Isaiah was right about this one. By the age of 2, Jesus Christ was able to differentiate between good and evil. He was able to refuse or reject evil as a mode of operation and choose good as the path in his decision-making approaches.

All children, given loving, nurturing, attentive parents can be in the place of Jesus at an early age as well. How we encourage, support, nurture and love our children make a huge difference in this world.

What if we were to 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? What if we did the same with one another? What if our faces beamed the light of God and we saw one another 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 have not received these affirmations in our own lives, perhaps we need to begin by speaking them to ourselves before speaking them to others.

What would happen to this world, if we saw “God is with us” in one another? Would it be so hard to do this? Would it be so hard to live into the prophet Isaiah’s prediction 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 self and 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 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 dye is set.

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. Amen.

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