

“Comfort in the Darkness”

Isaiah 7:1-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25
**The fourth in the Advent Series “Walking Together
in the Light of God”**

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From the Pulpit

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A sermon delivered by The Rev. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 18, 2022, Advent IV, dedicated to Hazel Elizabeth Sitler Stadie who was baptized into Christian faith on December 1st in the Memorial Chapel at Camp Lejeune, to my six other grandchildren, Benton, Ethan, Rylan, Aaden, Emryn, and Axel, and to all the children of First Church as they all excitedly arrive at Christmas 2022, to my mother and sister, Lorene K. Ahrens and Deborah K. Ahrens visiting with us today 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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We are inching ever closer to Christmas. Soon we will arrive in Bethlehem with angels singing, shepherds quaking, Mary in need of comfort and lots of help in the darkness. Soon our Savior will be born. Soon we will be witnessing and celebrating the birth of our Messiah.

But before we get to Bethlehem, we have to deal with wars and rumors of wars. We have to confront a faith crisis in Judah and in Joseph. So, let's look.

In Isaiah 7, there is a battle raging between the prophet Isaiah and King Ahaz of Judah. The king is in a foreign policy crisis with his two close neighbors to north. Israel and Syria are breathing down his neck and threatening attack. But, according to the prophet Isaiah, hostile neighbors are not his real crisis. According to Isaiah, Ahaz's real crisis is that Ahaz lacks faith in God and ***only faith can save him*** (Walter Brueggemann, *Texts for Preaching*, Westminster John Knox Press, Louisville, KY, 1995, pp. 28-29).

We pick up the story with the confrontation between prophet and king. It is really a confrontation between two contrasting security systems. There is God's security system and the military security system. Isaiah has given assurance that faith in God will save Ahaz and Judah. He goes one step further and challenges the king to set up a test as a way of determining if Isaiah speaks God's truth. The king refuses to test the defiant prophet – which is ironic – because such a refusal is actually a sign of piety in power struggle. He essentially appears to be following Deuteronomy 6:6 – “*Do not put the Lord your God to the test.*” But appearances can be deceiving. Look closer and you will see that he refuses to put his policies up against the claims of faith because he prefers to act like he is God. (*Ibid*).

The king's clever but stubborn refusal sets off the prophet of God. He launches into a devastating prophetic oracle. He puts the king on notice. He calls Yahweh “My God” and not “our God” and by implication – no longer “your God.” Yahweh has withdrawn from the Ahaz dynasty. There will be no more God in the Ahaz's corner.

Essentially, Isaiah is saying, “If your dynasty wants to be above God, so be it. But you will fall hard!”

Isaiah announces a sign – even though Ahaz has not asked for one! This might sound very familiar to you. A “young woman” shall bear a child whose name shall be Immanuel or “God with Us.” What’s interesting is that Isaiah says nothing about a virgin here. They are only talking about a young woman.... Anyway, before this child is old enough to consciously refuse evil and choose good (around 2 years old by Hebrew Scripture standards), the pending threat of Israel and Syria will dissipate. Once this child comes, they will no longer be threatened from the north. However, the good news gives way to bad news. The bad news is that the Assyrians are threatening to invade from the north. And everyone knows the Assyrians are ruthless, brutal, massive, and beyond resistance. They will wipe out Ahaz (*Ibid*).

The baby who we know as “the Reason for the Season” is the reason for this oracle. The baby reorders life in the public arena. The baby changes everybody’s schedules. If you don’t pay attention to the baby, you are in trouble. The innocence of a baby will convict the guilt of a King or a President, or quite frankly anyone given time.

Whether we read Isaiah’s prophecy as a prediction of the time it takes to topple a king (2 years and nine months) or a vision of Mary’s birthing Jesus, we must look at the truth in this prophecy. **Here it is: Everyone – including Kings – must pay attention to babies.**

Isaiah is not the only messenger about the birth of babies to save the world. In Matthew, an angel intervenes with Joseph who is about to divorce Mary for what appears to be infidelity. Through this nameless angel, God is Still Speaking. Interestingly, after Matthew’s genealogy

with 48 names in the first 17 verses of chapter one, we have NO name for the angel who appears here.

But the nameless angel brings a message and a name to Joseph. The name that he has for Joseph is Jesus. He tells Joseph to be assured that the child she is carrying is a “gift from God given by the Holy Spirit.” Joseph will name him “Jesus” and adopt him as his son into the lineage, into the House of David. He will “save the people from their sins.” In other words, Jesus IS the long-awaited savior. He is the one of whom Isaiah spoke.

The prophet Isaiah and the angel of the Lord are right about this one. By the age of 2, Jesus was able to differentiate between good and evil. He was able to refuse and reject evil as a mode of operation. He was able to choose good as the path in his decision-making and actions. And if you don't believe that a two-year old can do all this, you have not met my granddaughter, Emryn. She can differentiate, too. Her parents are doing something right because that girl can tell you what is right and what is wrong. That's why we say, “terrible twos” because they are actually calling all of us to the carpet. Literally!

Perhaps All children, given loving, nurturing, attentive parents and supporters can stand in a similar place at an early age. How we encourage, support, nurture and love our children makes a huge difference in this world. If we 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, I believe it will lead them to be righteous and beautiful, too.

Babies change everything!

Let's take it a step further... If political rulers don't deal with babies, they will pay the price. If they don't feed them, house them, educate them, nurture them, sustain and care for them, they will pay the price and the babies will haunt the rulers. Unfortunately, we live in a time when too many people care only about the baby before the baby is born, but they don't care about the baby once she is born. That is an indictment we will all carry if we don't care for the babies. And so, it doesn't matter whether you are Putin who doesn't care about the babies of Ukraine or Russia, or if you are President Biden and all our political leaders in Washington and Columbus, to not care for children comes back to haunt you.

To not provide proper prenatal care for pregnant mothers creates dangers for a child forming in embryo and being born into the world. To not properly feed children creates hungry ones who turn to crime as a way of survival. To not fully educate a child creates children who become potentially ignorant, vulnerable, and dangerous adults given the passage of time and hopelessness.

To not care for a child creates a little person who is neglected, ignored, unloved and becomes an adult who too often reflects the same. I have often said a life with too little love can create a lifetime with an inability to love others.

Lack of care for babies creates a world in disarray. Isaiah knew this. So did Ahaz. So do we. **Babies change the way we DO LIFE.** And if they don't, then the judgment falls on us as parents and grandparents and as citizens in this state and this nation.

How many of you have experienced the way a baby changes everything? Sleep, time, schedules, attention, shopping, work, church, life. They turn it all inside out and upside down. This "God with Us"

baby is no different – and yet is completely different. “God with Us” will – in time – change the world itself. Since he came into the world, thousands of rulers since his time have had to deal with him in some way or another. He has that effect on people.

“God is with Us” is a title that could apply to all God’s children. Every child born in this life is a reflection of “God is with us.” What makes our Immanuel special is that he refused evil and chose the good from birth all the way to his untimely death on a cross. He was born innocent and never stopped being innocent. It is this quality on which I would like to focus as we consider our salvation in his name.

This is the season and we are the people who can and should battle the presence of evil in this world. We are chosen for this and have been hearing about it all season long.

I’d like to close with a story which touched me years ago and is worth retelling today. It is the story of a young woman near Sacramento, CA. Steve Hartman (an Ohioan by birth) in his “On the Road” series told of a junior at William Jessup University. Her name was Jackie Turner. Jackie has straight A’s, good friends and a big heart. She works part-time as a tutor and was headed for a career to help troubled kids. She seemed to have it all.

Jackie’s future was definitely bright, but every single December the clouds rolled in. *“This time of year is so hard,”* Jackie said. *“It sinks for me. Everyone is talking about their cousins, their families, all the things that make up Christmas.”* But Jackie never had any of that in her life. Asked to recall some of the pleasant memories of her childhood, Jackie was silent. You could see her mind and spirit sinking into the past. She said, *“I remember getting locked up and locked in rooms. And I remember*

getting beaten for looking for food in my house. I was told it was stealing.” Born to a mother she never met and dad she wished she hadn’t, Jackie said she was abused, neglected, and starved.

Jackie found herself able to move on for 11 months out of every year, but that 12th has always posed a problem, which is why this year she decided to take action. Jackie said, *“This hurting, you’re tired of it, what are you going to do? And I was like, I’ll try ‘Craigslit.”*” That’s right, she went to Craigslit – where most people go to find an apartment or a used car, Jackie went looking for a happier holiday – for a family for Christmas.

Specifically, her classified said, *“I want to rent a mom and dad.”* She continued, *“Maybe for like a couple hours – I could be like the light of their life for that moment.”* She was even willing to pay, she said, *“Eight bucks, just to sit, which for a college student is affordable.”*

Jackie got dozens of responses – about half came from loving parents who wanted to help, for free of course – and the other half came from other young people who felt the same way she did.

“People are hurting and broken and we need each other,” Jackie said. *“We need to be loving people. And I think that’s what Christmas is all about.”*

So, Jackie held a meeting for all the people who contacted her. Her purpose: to pair up the needy with the needed to make sure no one in the room feels alone this holiday season. Jackie made about a half-a-dozen matches that night including one for herself – a woman from university student services named Anita Hermsmeier. *“I found my Mentor and my mom”* Jackie cried as she embraced Anita.

Jackie went to Craigslit thinking she wanted to rent a family, and she ended up creating families for others. She found and shared comfort

in December darkness. (© 2013 CBS Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved, Friday, December 20, 2013).

Many of you have found and shared comfort in December darkness already. Others of you are planning to be here and share Christmas comfort and joy one week from today at Bethlehem on Broad Street.

Jackie Turner is that child of God who refused evil and chose good. There are Jackie Turners in this room today. There are Jackie Turners in our church, in our community and in our lives, too. We don't have to go to Sacramento to find Jackie. We only have to open our eyes and ears to see and hear God with us in our times.

Isaiah was right. It's all about faith in God and faith in other people. It's about believing that God will come – with skin on – to resist evil and choose good. Evil wants to grab hold of us. But there is a child who is grabbing our finger and grabbing our attention this week. That little one is grabbing on to us and reaching into our souls and reaching into our lives and saying, “Stay with me. Stay with me and I will stay with you.” He has come to save us. Let's not miss him this year. Amen.

