

“Bright Light in the Darkest Night”

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

**The sixth in the Advent Series “Walking Together
in the Light of God”**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens
Senior Minister

December 24, 2022
11:00 p.m. Service

From the Pulpit

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A Christmas Meditation delivered by Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister, First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2022, Christmas Eve, 11:00 pm service, dedicated to Amy Wagner, Pat Patterson, Annette McCormick, Melissa Kulwicki and Mark Dahnke who worked faithfully this entire year to care for our building, our mission, our vision, and our congregation against all odds even while battling illnesses, injuries, COVID, and more, may God’s perpetual and blessed light shine on them, in them and through them to everyone everywhere in 2023 and dedicated always to the glory of God!

“Bright Light in the Darkest Night”

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

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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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According to the Gospel of Luke, our Christmas story begins – not with the voice of God, not with the song of angels, but with an order from an emperor. The Emperor Augustus of Rome orders everyone to register at the town of their birth to be counted in his census. This means that Joseph and Mary, who live in Nazareth must travel 100 miles on a donkey, during the rainy season to be counted. It doesn’t matter that Mary is nine months pregnant.

The very last place I would have wanted to be when Susan was nine months pregnant with Luke was walking through the rain and mountainous terrain to a town where we had no reservations anywhere to stay and deliver our firstborn into the world. My thoughts on this don't even begin to account for how Susan would have felt on a donkey in the rain and all the rest.

Emperors and dictators don't care about people's feelings or conditions. They certainly don't care about babies. They only care about their edicts. All they care about is counting what matters to them – the money they have stolen, the land they have stolen, the people they have subjugated and the growth of their empire.

If you don't believe me, take a look at Vladimir Putin. Like Emperor Augustus, he doesn't care about anyone else. He doesn't care about Russians or Ukrainians or Americans – anyone. He only cares about himself. He only cares about his power and his empire. He is not alone. Despots and Destructive Dictators are hoarding and counting their treasures tonight. And the people and nations in their path of destruction do not count at all.

Tonight, the whole world is not in stillness singing the carols of Christmas. With 30 wars raging across the globe tonight, too many of our global brothers and sisters are either fighting for their lives or praying for peace.

Ten months ago, tonight, Russia invaded Ukraine. Tonight, millions of Ukrainians are celebrating the birth of Jesus by candlelight. In the words of President Volodymyr Zelensky, *“they are doing this not because it is more romantic, but because they do not have electricity.”*

Speaking to the Joint session of the US Congress on Wednesday, December 21st, President Zelensky said, *“Millions won’t have neither heating nor running water. All of these will be the result of Russian missile and drone attacks on our energy infrastructure. But we do not complain. We do not judge and compare whose life is easier. Your well-being is the product of your national security; the result of your struggle for independence and your many victories. We, Ukrainians, will also go through our war of independence and freedom with dignity and success.*

We will celebrate Christmas. We will celebrate Christmas and, even if there is no electricity, the light of our faith in ourselves will not be put out. If Russian — if Russian missiles attack us, we’ll do our best to protect ourselves. If they attack us with Iranian drones and our people will have to go to bomb shelters on Christmas Eve, Ukrainians will still sit down at the holiday table and cheer up each other. And we don’t, don’t have to know everyone’s (Christmas) wish, as we know that all of us, millions of Ukrainians, wish the same: Victory. Only victory.”

In his inspirational speech, the 2022 Time Magazine Person of the Year, President Zelensky showed courage and resolve – all while delivering his entire speech in English – a man whose native language is Russian and his second language is Ukrainian. Since becoming President, beginning in the earliest hours of the war in February 2022, Zelensky has been strong. He doesn’t wear a helmet and bulletproof vest as he heads into the warzone. He believes, with his whole heart, that he needs to stand with his people in their struggles and he does. His singular and strong vision to win the war has inspired all Ukrainians and all the world – except Russian dictator, Vladimir Putin. Zelensky believes in his people and he has told the world they will remain strong and resolute until the war is won. **“Only Victory”** is their battle cry.

Born to Ukrainian Jewish parents, the 44 year old Zelensky, trained as a lawyer but was best known as a comedian before running for the Presidency – which he won with 73% of the vote in 2019. He has shown unbreakable determination in the face of the devastating assault from the Russian military. His belief in his people and absolute confidence that they will win the war is inspirational.

He admits that the war has changed him. He has aged and changed this year *“from all this wisdom that I never wanted.”* Aides who once saw him as a lightweight now praise his toughness. Sights that might once have upset him now elicit no more than a shrug. Some of his allies miss the old Zelensky, the practical joker with the boyish smile. But they realize he needs to be different now, much harder and deaf to distractions, or else his country might not survive.

In the face of evil which seeks to destroy, God calls amazing children of God who stand up to be counted. President Zelensky and the freedom fighters of Ukraine are such a people for such a time as this.

In the darkest nights, bright lights are needed to show us the way. In our story, the star of Bethlehem shined brightly over the barn in Bethlehem where Jesus was born. It pointed the way for shepherds and magi to greet the newborn Savior. It was a beacon for all who had lost faith and lost track of where they were and who they were. But our bright lights tonight come in the form of candlelight – here and the whole world over. All our candles lit tonight count. Together they shine brighter than the star of Bethlehem. Joined together with our Jewish sisters and brothers on this seventh of eight nights of Hannukah, our lights, together can save the world.

DO you see the power of One at work? One person can believe and bring others along in the battle for what right and good and just. The

power of one is quite a powerful gift this Christmas Eve. In the love of Jesus, the power of one becomes transformational.

So tonight, in the spirit of Volodymyr Zelensky and the Ukrainian people, I appeal to you to have faith in God and for all of us to have in one another, too. Let us come together, stand together, and shine the light of God which is in each one of us. Let God's light shine in you, through you and from you to all people you meet and serve. May this light bring hope to you and all this night.

May each of the little lights of God shining in each of us tonight brighten this dark night. And let us put together all our little lights and in the spirit of the Ukrainian people sit down at the holiday table and cheer up each other. And let us, like our sisters and brothers in Ukraine, have one wish for our families, our church, our community, our nation and the world – a wish that counts mightily as we push back the darkness – *“Victory. Only victory.”*

Let us all walk together in the light of God as we now come together at our Savior's table of grace. Amen.

