



A Six Part Sermon Series

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Senior Minister

&

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson  
Interim Associate Minister

*November 27 through December 24, 2022*

From the Pulpit of  
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**“Let us Walk in the Light of God”**

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens

**“A New Way”**

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**“The Light of Jubilee”**

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**“Comfort in the Darkness”**

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The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens



# “Let us Walk in the Light of God”

**Isaiah 2:1-5; Romans 13:11-14; Matthew 24:36-44**

Part I of VI in the Advent sermon series,  
“Walking Together in the Light of God”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister

November 27, 2022

A sermon dedicated to all who have died with HIV/AIDS, to those who live with AIDS and on our 34th World AIDS Day on December 1st, all who have battled to save lives in the pandemic which first appeared in 1981; to the five murder victims in the Club Q nightclub in Colorado Springs, CO; to the six murder victims at Walmart in Chesapeake, VA; to the three UVA students killed in Charlottesville, VA on November 13, to Mrs. Pauline Yohe who turned 93 on November 26th, to the children, teens, parents and all families in our congregation; 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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Pastor Shane Claiborne is a pastor, teacher, writer and blacksmith. On Sundays he preaches and on Mondays you can find him

hammering at the forge as he beats guns into garden tools. Shane believes we should all be beating guns into shovels.

Instead of arming our nation for a war against itself and instead of lamenting one more mass murder shooting – like in the Chesapeake, Virginia Walmart last Tuesday where a supervisor killed six colleagues in a break room before turning the gun on himself, or like the Club Q Nightclub on November 19th in a place where the gay community found safety, laughter, friendship, and love in Colorado Springs until eight days ago when five people were murdered and 19 injured by a hate-filled gunman, or like the three University of Virginia football players murdered by a former teammate in a parking garage after coming back to UVA after seeing a play in Washington DC twelve days ago – Pastor Shane Claiborne knows and he actually practices what he preaches. He beats guns into garden tools.

This is no modest dream in the most gun-owning nation on Earth, where no one thought anything of a 1950s TV show cowboy hero named Roy Rogers naming his dog Bullet and his horse Trigger. Our gun-owning households often have not just one gun but an arsenal, and our culture is deeply invested in the idea that guns are a solution and not a problem. Into the arsenal walks Claiborne and his blacksmithing friends. Shane asks people to surrender their weapons for mass destruction, turning every caliber of firepower into gardening tools and monuments.

Shane is an Evangelical Christian who believes this is what Jesus would do. He says, *‘People say we don’t have a gun problem, we have a heart problem. We have come to realize we’ve got both a gun problem and a heart*

*problem. God heals hearts and people change laws and we need to think of it as both of those.*

*I grew up in Tennessee talking about being pro-life. But I began to see how narrowly we've defined that, especially in Christianity, where you can be pro-life as long as you're against abortion. You could still be pro-death penalty, pro-war and call yourself pro-life, as long as you are anti-abortion. So, I really wanted to be more consistent about my own advocacy for life.*

*And when it comes to guns, we evangelical Christians, white evangelicals own guns at a higher rate than the general public. That became really troubling to me, that the folks that are worshipping the Prince of Peace are packing heat” (“Evangelical activist Shane Claiborne wants to beat our guns into plowshares — really,” Patti Morrison, *Los Angeles Times*, April 3, 2019).*

*Shane continues, “It’s hard to put words to what happens at the forge as we gather round the fire at the forge and speak of it as a symbol of the Spirit of God. As you move the metal towards the fire, it begins to take on the character of the fire, so it glows, and it softens. We believe that that should transform us into people that care about peace and love.”*

Shane talks about Democrats and Republicans, police chiefs and officers and gang members coming together at the forge. Gun owners and survivors of gun violence; mothers who have lost their children to gun violence – sometimes by suicide and sometimes by homicide – and the people who have been part of the killings all gathering around the forge, all taking the hammer and all pounding and often crying, and sometimes screaming out their pain, all to turn their pain into tools for peace.

It is Shane's vision based on Isaiah's vision which greets us as we step into Advent today. Shane didn't come up with this idea of beating swords into plowshares. Isaiah writes that "Weapons" are to be beaten into "new tools." We are called to see and believe a new vision that "shall come to pass." His vision is for Judah and Jerusalem – but it's really for Ohio and Columbus. It's really for America and the world. He offers God's word that in the nation and in the city on a hill, peace shall come to pass. Jerusalem shall become the place where swords are beaten into plowshares and spears into pruning hooks, the place where nations shall no longer lift swords against nations and no one shall learn war, anymore. But Jerusalem won't be and shouldn't be the only place this happens.

Is this just a fantastical vision? Perhaps. But perhaps it is the vision of the way God sees the world which God created in the first place. We could use such a vision in our world – in our nation – today. Words would be used for healing not for destroying one another.

For example, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and all social media would be the place which brings us together rather creates cruel fever and angst against one another. Maybe you should give up Facebook for Advent and Christmas this year or at least use it only for kindness and peacemaking, and not for snarkiness and cruelty or supporting snarkiness and cruelty with thumbs up or worse yet— no response at all.

Beyond the weapons of words, actual weapons would be laid down and friendship and healthy relationships rather than terror and fear would become the measure of our society's greatness.

The prophet's words may seem like a dream to you. But not to me. As I walked the streets of Jerusalem in June and many times



through the years and witnessed the intensity and power of feeling and faith the people there bring to their everyday existence, I have imagined that the coming of peace is desired just as intensely by God as by God's people. The problem is that each faith tradition cares so deeply about that place and its historic buildings, that no one is willing to let go of it, and yet each faith tradition in its effort to possess and control Jerusalem, fails to hold the very gem which they can never truly possess.

Similarly, in our nation and in our lives, that which we try to hold on to and possess, eludes us. Sometimes, we hold onto something so tight and seek to make it be the way we want it to be, or believe it "should be," that we strangle it and smother it with our well-meaning intentions and our self-pride. We discover, in so doing, that the "way things should be, can't be." They can never be the way we try to force them to be.

We can do this in our jobs. We can do it in our families. We can do it in school. We can do it in relationships. We do it with our beliefs and our faith. We can do it here at First Church, with our church community and our idea of what it should be. Perhaps we hold onto a memory, or maybe it's a belief system, or a life commandment (by this I mean "We have to follow this – or that – tradition." This is known as the seven last words of the church – **"We've never done it that way before"**), and then we seek with all our imagination to keep something the way we believe it is meant to be.

But truthfully, it never was "just that way." It never can be and it never will be "just that way." We do well, as we anticipate the unexpected arrival of the baby, of the Messiah to begin to beat our swords into plowshares (our guns into garden tools) and our images

of “how things are supposed to be” into the life as it actually is or can be. Beauty and true possibilities for life and living become possible when we let go of Our “shoulds” and embrace God’s “coulds.” That alone would mark an unexpected arrival in our hearts and minds.

In Matthew 24, we encounter other seemingly violent and unexpected arrivals. There’s a flood. There’s a kidnapper. There’s a disappeared farmer and his wife, and a thief in the night are sharp, intrusive and disturbing images that bring in this new year of Christian faith and introduce Advent one more time. That’s right.

Just when you thought it safe to bring friends and family to church for the holidays, the Gospel of Matthew opens up a full-frontal assault of warnings about being unprepared for Noah’s flood (the destructive flood of a lifetime), or being suddenly kidnapped while working in field and mill, or being robbed while sleeping in your home by a break-in robber who takes all that you have! Again, what a way to welcome family and friends to church for the holidays.

Is it any wonder that people choose to stay away from church – moving to high ground, avoiding kidnap and protecting their homes filled with new Christmas gifts purchased just two days ago, many in the pre-dawn hours of “Black Friday?!”

Our first Century ancestors of faith had a way with words. They wanted us to be sure, as their cozy Christian cousins 2,000 years later, we wouldn’t miss the message of the coming of God!

**God will come – suddenly! So – be prepared! Watch out! Be awake! Wait for God!**

Our early forbearers in faith wanted us to know what they already knew – that Christianity is filled with “the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune” of which Hamlet spoke in his famous soliloquy (William Shakespeare, Hamlet, Act 3, Scene 1). And Advent is the season in which we are introduced most bluntly to these slings and arrows and their double-edged reality.

On the one edge is the great, good news of the coming of God. On the other edge is the cost of the discipleship involved in welcoming the newborn Christ! We want good news with no cost. We want Christmas with no Advent. We want the baby with no pregnancy, labor or delivery. Some of us even want a victory over Michigan but fail to stop five touchdowns of more than 45 yards or more. Count them – five totaling 344 yards...ouch.

We can't just have it come because we want it to come. Life doesn't work that way. In life, we need a defense that stops the run and the pass. Glory certainly doesn't work that way. Does it? The coming of God comes with a cost and in the full (and sometimes fearful) force of daily life. **We can't get to glory without working to bring glory home.**

The late, great German pastor, prophet, martyr and theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer delivered these words in an Advent sermon on December 2, 1928. He was 22 years old when preaching in his first parish in Barcelona, Spain. He's brilliant. Speaking of faith and life in the season of Advent, young Bonhoeffer wrote:

*“Celebrating Advent means learning how to wait. Waiting is an art which our impatient age has forgotten. The blessedness of waiting is lost on those who cannot wait and the fulfillment of promise is never theirs. They want quick answers to the deepest questions of life and miss the value of those times of*

*anxious waiting, seeking with patient uncertainties until the answers come. They lose the moment when the answers are revealed in dazzling clarity because they are not watching. They are not paying attention.*

*...Not all can wait.... But those who learn to wait are uneasy about their way of life, but yet have seen a vision of greatness in the world and in the future and are patiently expecting its fulfillment. The celebration of Advent is possible only to those who are troubled in soul, who know themselves to be poor and imperfect, and who are looking forward to something greater to come. Waiting becomes a measure of our conscience. We have to practice self-examination to wait for God which can be terrifying... Only when we have felt the terror of the matter, can we recognize the incomparable kindness. God comes into the very midst of evil and death and judges the evil in us and in the world. And by judging us, God cleanses and sanctifies us, comes to us with grace and love” (A Testament to Freedom: The Essential Writings of Dietrich Bonhoeffer, G. B. Kelly and F.B. Nelson (eds.), Harper, San Fran., CA, 1995, pp.185-186).*

In our waiting and in our self-examination, God’s light within each one of us and all those in our lives begins to illumine our path. In her new book, *The Light we Carry: Overcoming in Uncertain Times*, Michelle Obama writes:

*“I believe that each of us carries a bit of inner brightness, something entirely unique and individual. A flame that’s worth protecting. When we are able to recognize our own light, we become empowered to use it. When we learn to foster what’s unique in the people around us, we become better able to build compassionate communities and make meaningful change.”*

Carrying the inner brightness of God will guide our waiting and will deliver us to the day of an unexpected arrival – a baby in a manger. We have to be aware. We have to be awake. We have to watch. We

have to wait. We have to do the right thing on the way to Christmas. Every day. It may be frightening at first. But do not let fear hold us in its grip.

In God's coming again, we will be given "new tools" to interpret what we thought we already knew. Be ready to receive the new tools which God is offering you now. Amen.



# “A New Way”

## Matthew 3:1-12

Part II of VI in the Advent sermon series,  
“Walking Together in the Light of God”

The Rev. Joanna Samuelson, Interim Associate Minister

December 4, 2022

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O Holy One, You come to us in ways that are familiar and comforting at this time of year – and You also come to us in ways that are discomfoting, too – and so we pray that you would keep us open and receptive as You speak to us through Your Word for us this day. And, O dear God, may the words that I have to offer, here, this morning, please You and honor You and glorify Your Holy Name. In Jesus’ name, we pray, Amen.

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I want to begin this morning by asking all of you some questions ... Now, this is NOT a quiz! Rather, it’s just a way to begin to engage this challenging story from Matthew this morning! So, here’s my first question ...

When you’re setting out on an unfamiliar journey – traveling to a new destination, **HOW DO YOU FIND YOUR WAY?**

How many of you use a traditional map – in paper form? Or maybe an atlas? (*I still love those old maps ... made out of paper – but they're hard to come by these days!*)

How many of you use a real-time, web navigation device like Google Maps or Bing Maps? (*My kids finally trained me to use Google Maps a few years back!*)

Or how many of you – perhaps – have a **co-pilot** – or maybe a ‘backseat driver’ – who is always willing to help navigate the way?

And, how many of you just have a *really good sense of direction* – and **rarely** need any assistance in **FINDING YOUR WAY?**

**FINDING OUR WAY ...** This *certainly* has been a common theme in our lives in recent times, hasn't it?

I mean, all of us – **every single one of us** – all around the planet — have been **FINDING OUR WAY** – through these pandemic times during these past two years and nine months. And, just recently, I learned some new language to describe these times – “TRIPLE-DEMIC.” In other words, we need to continue to be careful and cautious about the spread of COVID as well as RSV and influenza.

**And so, we are, indeed, STILL finding our way through these times – together!**

And, here, in these transitional times, at First Church, we are certainly **FINDING OUR WAY** – together – through *all* the challenges and losses **and** opportunities that come with these times – while also tending to the wide range of feelings that we are all experiencing in response to these in-between times.



**We ARE finding our way.**

And, at this time of year, many among us are also **FINDING OUR WAY** through the crowds at the malls as we do our Christmas shopping ... or perhaps **FINDING OUR WAY** through the stress of online shopping!

And, as of this past Friday night, thanks to the University of Utah, our Buckeyes may have **FOUND THEIR WAY** into the College Football Playoff! Go Bucks!

So – here we all are – **SEEKING OUR WAY** and **FINDING OUR WAY** through the ups and downs of our lives – and within our life together – and in this busy, and often stressful, time of year.

Now, wouldn't it be comforting and reassuring, if, on this second Sunday of Advent, we were to be met with words of Scripture that acknowledge our *perseverance* and *resolve* in the midst of the stress and struggles of our lives?

But, **no**, instead, in our Gospel reading from Matthew today, God confronts us and challenges us – and maybe even **dis-comforts** us – through God's word for us this day which is a call for **REPENTANCE!**

And, as is often the case, God comes to us in unexpected ways and often through the voice of those who are deemed “**the other.**” And so, in our text this morning, God **grabs the attention** of the people who had gathered, there, in the wilderness of Judea, through the compelling preaching of John the Baptist, this one who was a *wanderer*.

He was an *outcast* – this one who – according to both Matthew and Mark – wore clothes made of camel’s hair and ate locusts and wild honey! John the Baptist was *eccentric* and **very** different from that crowd of people in just about every way.

He didn’t fit in. He was definitely an outsider, and yet, God still chose John the Baptist to go to the people – and meet the people exactly where they were – and as they were in order to wake them up – and to challenge them – and to prepare them for **The Way** – that is, for a **NEW WAY!**

Now, the word **ADVENT**, as you may know, is derived from the Latin word **ADVENTUS**, or the Biblical Greek word **PAROUSIA**, both of which literally mean “*a coming or a new beginning.*”

And so, here, in this story, John the Baptist represents a bridge, if you will, between **WHAT HAS BEEN** and **WHAT IS YET TO BE**. He has one foot in the old age which is coming to a close – and his other foot is in a time that is just being born. And so, in this story, John the Baptist – this prophet – represents a **bridge** between the eras of Israel’s history.

And the Gospel writer of Matthew makes that clear for us by quoting the ancient words of the prophet Isaiah who wrote:

*The voice of the one crying out in the wilderness:  
prepare the way of the Lord; make his paths straight.*

So, here we are – in this in-between time – this liminal space, if you will – with John the Baptist, representing **what has been** while he also points toward **what is yet to be**.

And again, the setting of this story is the wilderness. And that is significant because the Biblical Greek word for wilderness is “*eremia*” which is translated as a **place of renewal and revelation**.

Now, I don’t know about you, but I do find that to be very reassuring ... that these wilderness places of our lives – and these transitional

times along our journeys – can be seen and experienced as a time of renewal and revelation and insight – a time to re-set and reorient ourselves to a **NEW WAY of being** ... if we are open to it!

And how do we do that?

Well, John the Baptist certainly does **NOT** mince words, and according to Matthew 3:2, John appears in the wilderness while proclaiming, “**Repent** for the kingdom of heaven has come near!”

And then, again, in verse 8, this time, addressing the Pharisees and the Sadducees who had been coming for baptism, John the Baptist warned them when he said, “Bear fruit worthy of **repentance!**”

He, then, went on to tell the crowd (v. 11), “*I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire.*”

## **Repentance ...**

It’s a loaded word, isn’t it? It’s a concept that I think many of us probably associate with “fire and brimstone” preaching – that type of preaching that relies on the depiction of eternal damnation as a persuasion to follow God’s will ... that type of preaching that we

**DON'T** often hear within the United Church of Christ. **Thank goodness!**

However, the word, *repentance*, is derived from the Biblical Greek word, **METANOIA**, which literally means: *to change one's mind – or to turn around – or to reorient oneself*. It describes a *spiritual* re-orientation.

And I find that to be especially helpful in this season of Advent – during *this* time – when we are called to *prepare the way of the Lord*.

In all the busyness – and the stress – and the “overscheduledness” of these weeks leading up to Christmas, we can always count on John the Baptist – this truth-teller who doesn't mince words – to remind us and confront us and implore us – to *look within* and to *examine our hearts* and to *prepare our whole selves* for the birth of the Christ child – within our hearts – and in our lives – once again!

I'd like to close this morning with a brief prayer written by Joyce Rupp who is an author, spiritual director, and co-director of the Institute of Compassionate Presence.

## **“Advent Prayer”**

*O Holy One,  
awaken our hearts,  
quiet our minds,  
open the door of our beings to perceive Your presence.  
Settle what stirs endlessly within us.  
Quiet the voice of haste and hurry.  
Awaken our inner senses to recognize Your love hiding beneath the frenzy.  
Enfold us in Your attentiveness.  
Wrap a mantle of mindfulness around every part of our days.  
We want to welcome You with joy and focus on your dwelling place within.*

Amen!



# “The Light of Jubilee”

**Isaiah 35:1-10; Luke 1:46b-55; Matthew 11:2-11**

Part III of VI in the Advent sermon series,

“Walking Together in the Light of God”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister

December 11, 2021

A baptismal mediation dedicated to Lola “Jimmy” Davis Edwards and Jacquelyn “Jackie” Dean, our 2022 Lay Leader Award winners, to Amelia Joyce Stewart on her baptismal day, and to the Dominican Sisters of Peace whose prayers and unconditional love penetrate darkness and transform lives 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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Are you a person who has dedicated your life to one focus and one purpose? Are you someone whose pursuit of a product, or a way of living in this world, or an idea, or a certain truth, a mission, if you will, is so clearly governed that you are driven to achieve this or to see this come to pass and deliver it for others? What I am trying

to ask in any number of ways is are you more like John the Baptist than you ever imagined?

I believe we have more in common with John than we think we do. I don't see any of you dressed like a wild man and I don't believe you thrive on a regular diet of locusts and wild honey, but I believe many of you live by clear live commandments and inner-directed truths which guide you. For example, "no child should ever be left behind" – in life, in education, in terms of a chance to make it in this world. Or, perhaps, "my factory doesn't make junk." We produce the highest quality product and deliver it on time and guarantee its excellence at the highest level.

For John it was simple as he went into the desert and baptized in The River Jordan – "Confess your sins, turn your life around and return to God." The work of confession is something between ourselves and God. It can be done in the silence of a darkened prison cell as we wait to be beheaded, as was true with John. Or it can be shouted from a roof top for all to hear. But it is about "I and Thou," about "me and Thee," it is about every child of God and their Savior, their God.

But for John, that wasn't all. The turning around was complete when they received a new word from the Messiah who was coming. Thus, his question to Jesus – **"Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?"**

What does Jesus say? He tells his disciples to go and tell John what they hear, what they see. The blind receive sight. Those who cannot walk, walk again. Those who are diseased with leprosy are cleansed and healed. The deaf hear again. The dead rise from the grave and the poor have good news delivered to them. The year of



Jubilee – the deliverance of prophecy, the hope for all the nations is happening because of Jesus. You can't make this stuff up. When politicians ask, "Are you better off now than before?" we all go back and forth in our minds. But there is no denying all the changes wrought by Jesus in his ministry. His healing, his teaching, his profound impact of people's lives is palpable and clear. I believe it still is!

I see that people who truly follow the Risen Christ in their lives are changed for the better. They bear a peacefulness and joy that guides them each day. They focus on the best in others rather than the worst. They lift up and celebrate the gifts of the Spirit alive and well in this world and then step into sharing those gifts with others. They see the light in the darkest days and focus on hope. In the words of Paul's letter to the Romans in 8:28, Jesus' disciples live into this daily routine of transformation – *"We know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to God's purpose."*

What if you were to carry this focus, this attitude, this purpose into your daily workplace and interactions with others? This is the light of Jubilee. This is ours which was cleared by John the Baptist and paved by Jesus Christ 2,000 years ago – a path to walk in the glory of God and to be part of fulfilling the purpose of God in this world – each in our own ways.

In his little book, *The Dark Night of the Soul*,\* written from the darkness of his prison cell in the 16th Century, St. John of the Cross, illumined our path out of darkness and into the light of God. John was a small man, less than five feet tall. When St. Teresa of Avila met him, she called him "half a friar." Like her, he was a

Carmelite, an order founded on the ideals of a simple life spent in solitude and prayer. He was taken prisoner by other priests and guards in 1577 for his beliefs about prayer. For 11 months he was left in a dark cell – with only bread and water, not allowed to bathe or change his clothes. He was only allowed out to be flogged by the other priests. He began writing the reflections for *The Dark Night of the Soul* in his mind's eye because he had no paper or pen. He would memorize his words for later writing. Later, one priest would bring him paper and he would write when the sun broke through the cracks in the walls once a day.

His book is not what you think. He doesn't say much about religion. His language is passionate and speaks to the senses. *The dark night* is actually a love story, full of painful joy expressed in relation to the most elusive lover of all. John doesn't offer any help to anyone seeking a better grip on God. In fact, he emphasizes that God cannot be grasped. In John's native Spanish, his word for God is "nada." God is "no Thing." God is not a thing. Since God is not a thing, God cannot be held onto. God can only be encountered as that which eclipses the reality of all other things.

John writes about what God is not. He wants his readers to clear their hearts and minds of all the images and ideas about God that become obstacles between them and the Real Thing. He takes all the language which we hold as fully understood about "sin," "salvation," "repentance," and "grace" and turns them inside out. For example, rather than our given understanding of sin, we are pointed to a deeper understanding – sin is really about "betrayal, brokenness, forgetfulness, and our own deadly distance from the source of all life."

I believe this shift, this “Nada” should be liberating and not confusing. God as “Nada,” as “No thing” – should be received, as it was delivered from *The Dark Night of the Soul*, as a gift. We all know, Christianity is changing. In the words of Theologian Phyllis Tickle, “we are in the midst of a great rummage sale which the Christian Church through the ages holds from time to time.” We have accumulated a lot of junk which have no place in our house anymore – old and worn-out hymns, books, sermons, ideas, and theologies which need to be put out for sale for pennies on the dollar (The price drops in half after 12 noon!).

I love what Harvey Cox calls this time in his book *The Future of Faith*. He calls this time, “The Age of the Spirit.” We can no longer hold on to our old ways and call them perfect and good. We must be changed by young and transforming voices who are calling us to a new way, a new path, a path in which God is “Nada” – not dead at all – but not what we have all said God is. Sometimes it takes a 600 year-old, four foot something monk to show us the way forward.

This all started with John the Baptist’s question, **“Are you the one who is to come or should we wait for another?”** And Jesus’ answers, **“You tell John what you see and hear.”** Give it time. Lean into the dark night of the soul. Let the Light break through the stones we have constructed to shine a sliver of light on the hope of the nations.

So, Amelia, and all the children of First Church, the future is yours. Do not be afraid of the dark. Out of our darkest nights come the dawn of morning in which God’s new light and life shines. And in the bright morning star, hope is truly born. Amen.

\* References and material from *The Dark Night of the Soul* are drawn from Barbara Brown Taylor's *Learning to Walk in the Dark*, chapter 7, pp. 133-148, Harper and Row, Harper Collins Publishing, NY, NY, 2014.

# “Comfort in the Darkness”

**Isaiah 7:1-16; Romans 1:1-7; Matthew 1:18-25**

Part IV of VI in the Advent sermon series,

“Walking Together in the Light of God”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister

December 18, 2022

A sermon 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 'Craigslist.'"* That's right, she went to Craigslist – 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 Craigslist 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.

# “A Flashlight in the Manger”

**Luke 2:1-20**

Part V of VI in the Advent sermon series,  
“Walking Together in the Light of God”  
The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Senior Minister

December 24, 2022

7:30 PM

A Christmas meditation dedicated to all our babies born in 2022, to all our children who returned to church this year, to the teens and parents of First Church who show-up all the time and constantly bring us a spirit of joy and mission 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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She had never heard her parents talk like this before, but for days, Sally kept hearing her mom and dad talk about Charlie coming to town. Apparently, Charlie was huge, filled with fury and wherever he went, he destroyed things. He was big enough to knock down trees, houses and schools. “When Charlie arrives,” her parents said, “we are all going to hide so he doesn’t destroy us.” Charlie was fierce

and mean. Charlie was scary. It turns out, Charlie was a Hurricane. Sally didn't know much about hurricanes, but she knew a lot about Charlie.

At night, Sally went to bed and asked God to stop Charlie, to make him go away and to make him nice. She would keep her flashlight on in bed, hoping he wouldn't come at all. In spite of her prayers, Charlie came to town late one night. He was as bad as everyone said he would be – maybe worse. Although she was brave, Sally's flashlight had burned out and she faced Charlie in the darkness. Her parents kept telling her stories and singing her hymns and songs she loved. But, alone in the darkness, Sally prayed for the bright morning light to come. Finally, the sun rose on a new day. Charlie had passed by, and Sally saw the path of his destruction. He had taken so much from so many and no power meant nights of darkness. Sally never forgot the fright she felt in the darkest night of Charlie's devastation.

Remembering Charlie, Sally was determined to help others who were afraid of the dark. On Christmas Eve, Sally went to church determined to help a friend for Christmas. When she went into the sanctuary, she placed a lit flashlight in the manger right beside baby Jesus. She whispered, "Welcome to the world baby Jesus. Baby Jesus, Charlie scared me, but I won't let him scare you. This light will keep you safe tonight."

Like Sally, when children are asked what they want most in the middle of storms, in the midst of war, in the challenging nights of their lives, children say they want a flashlight to push back the darkness that closes in around them.

Tonight, in Zhovkva, Ukraine, Polish Dominican Sisters are lighting candles and flashlights for the children facing another night in the dark with no power and heat. As they sing “Silent Night,” they all push back the darkness of war. All across Ukraine, people are lighting candles tonight to push back the darkness. And there is a flashlight in the manger to keep baby Jesus safe tonight.

Tonight, in South Sudan, children are caught in the crossfire of civil war. Doctors Without Borders are there offering them light in the darkness, medical care, fresh water and food. We pray that someone has placed a flashlight in the manger to welcome the newborn Jesus.

Tonight, in Columbus, Ohio, children and parents are gathered together in the YWCA Family Shelter and in warming centers across our city to receive a blessing, a gift, a meal, a kind word of love and will hear the Christmas story once again. And there is a flashlight in the manger to bring hope and welcome to Jesus.

In Sally, the sisters, the doctors, and the people in our shelters, we come to witness the Power of One. One person, one group, one volunteer, one friend can turn around a life in the darkest night. In the newborn Jesus, the Power of One holds each of our hearts and binds us together in love.

In the spirit of Jesus, of Sally, the Dominican Sisters in Ukraine, Doctors without Borders in South Sudan, volunteers and staff in the homeless family shelters and warming centers in our city tonight and all the children who gather everywhere, let us bring a flashlight to the manger so that baby Jesus comes in peace, feel protected and safe, and so he can find comfort in our joy – tonight.

Let us put a flashlight in the manger tonight as well. May we all feel the warmth and love of the newborn Christ tonight. May we make it through the night, to the bright morning hope of Christmas day. Amen.



# “Bright Light in the Darkest Night”

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

Part VI of VI in the Advent sermon series

“Walking Together in the Light of God”

The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, Sr., Senior Minister

December 24, 2022

11:00 PM

A Christmas meditation 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!

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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 has 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.



