

“All Things Came into Being Through Him”

Isaiah9:2-7; Titus2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14

Sixth of Six in the sermon series: “How Does a Weary World Rejoice?”

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December 24, 2023

From the Pulpit of
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The final Christmas Eve Meditation delivered by The Rev. Dr. Timothy C. Ahrens, as Senior Minister, The First Congregational Church, United Church of Christ, Columbus, Ohio, December 24, 2023, 11pm, dedicated to my mother Lorene K. Ahrens, my late father, Herman C. Ahrens, Jr. and all my family, to all the people living and fighting for life in darkness tonight, may light break forth on their lives and this world and always to the glory of God!

“All Things Came into Being Through Him”

Isaiah9:2-7; Titus2:11-14; Luke 2:1-20; John 1:1-14

John 1:1-5 – In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

The prologue to the Gospel of John is a passage that is hidden in plain sight. One week ago, we heard it as the final lesson at Lessons and Carols. We hear it each year on Maundy Thursday as the final reading at Tenebrae before the Christ Candle is extinguished. It is listed each year as a reading for Christmas, but it is always the last choice for all the Christmas services – buried by Luke’s telling of the birth of Jesus in a barn, with an innkeeper, angels, shepherds, sheep and cattle all around and Matthew’s description of three wise ones from the East. John gets lost at Christmas.

We love John’s poetry. But the poet is pushed off center stage by Luke, the journalist, writing the who, what, when and where of the Bethlehem birth. John brings us the why. We never hear **WHY**. We come to Christmas for certitude. And mystical poetry does not give us certitude. So, John waits in the wings as the Forever Understudy – listening and silent in the stillness of

this night. In this, my final Christmas Sermon, I bow to the mysterious and elusive poet and author of John's Gospel.

Finally, comes the poet... Let us pray...

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Let us pray: May the words of my mouth the meditations of each one of your hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our rock and our salvation. Amen.

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Two sentences captivate poetic and prophetic imagination in The Gospel of John, Chapter 1. "*All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being.*" And "*The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.*" John audaciously declares we would not be here, we would not exist – except for the Christ.

"*All things came into being through him*" has always seemed outrageous or even exclusivist on the surface. How does John know this? Who told him that all things came into being through Jesus? But there is something deep within me that trusts John. I trust the poet. Sometimes what is on the surface, speaks to a truth that is deep in the human soul and the divine consciousness. I believe this is one of those deep truths.

Why not bring all life, all hope, all beauty, all everything into the world – from the beginning of the creation of the world – **through him** – the one who is light, life, and love? After all, He is God's embodiment of all that is good.

Why not declare this prophetic/poetic truth?

It is a perfect set-up to explain what happens next... **The Light** (not A light) shines (presence tense) in the Darkness and the Darkness DID NOT (past tense) overcome it." Darkness did not overcome THE Light. Darkness Cannot overcome the Light. Darkness Will Never overcome the Light.

Darkness always and forever has, does and will succumb to THE Light. In a world that walks in darkness, plays in darkness, is titillated by darkness, seeks darkness, Light wins. Light (and Right) will prevail – no matter what the challenges, no matter what the odds. Light wins over Darkness.

Following the end of “*The War to End All Wars*” (aka World War I), another great poet, William Butler Yeats wrote “*The Second Coming*.” His words spoke to a grieving world about to turn once again from the horrors of trench warfare to an unknown and difficult to perceive new world order. It was Christmas 1919. And so, I invite another poet to join John at center stage. Listen as he vexes your Christmas certitude. Yeats wrote:

Turning and turning in the widening gyre (Jai -ur)
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.

Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.

*The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

We can feel the rough beast slouching toward Bethlehem tonight, 104 years later. As the creature arrives, he finds Manager Square is empty. The pastors and priests cancelled Christmas earlier tonight in Bethlehem.

They have assembled a creche. It isn't subtle. Nor is it intended to be. Instead of a pastoral-looking Nativity scene, the creche features baby Jesus wrapped in a checkered Palestinian kaffiyeh (kuh – FEE – yuh) surrounded by jagged chunks of stone – evoking bombed-out buildings in the Gaza Strip and children buried beneath them. Surrounding this surreal and devastating manger scene are Mary and Joseph, the shepherds and the angels, even the three wise men. They are all in the rubble looking for life.

“I see God in the rubble,” said Pastor Munther Isaac, the Palestinian pastor of the Lutheran church in Bethlehem, the West Bank town revered by Christians as Jesus' birthplace. *“And Christ was born under occupation.”* Pastor Isaac reminds us that days after Jesus' birth, hundreds of first-born babies were slaughtered by King Herod as the vicious killer King sought to exterminate the newborn Savior (drawn from an LA Times article *“In Bethlehem, the home of Jesus' birth, a season of grieving for Palestinian Christians,”* Laura King, December 19, 2023).

Tonight, in Bethlehem, singing voices are stilled while the only sounds breaking the silence are missiles splitting the night air, and mothers and fathers screaming with the burial of their babies. With only 3,000 Christians in Gaza and hundreds having already died in the siege, the future of Christians in Palestine is bleak – as we stand close to extinction there.

Over 1,000 Christians are hiding in compounds of the only two churches in Gaza that are left standing. Last week, two women crossing through the open square in one of the church compounds were killed by snipers. They were not terrorists. They were a mother and daughter trying to survive war. Two more Christians dead. Tonight, the newborn Jesus is weeping. We need to weep with him. Tonight, The Light is barely flickering in Bethlehem.

Tonight, no services can sing joy when over 1,500 Israeli soldiers and innocents lay slain. Tonight, there is no peace when more than 20,000 Palestinian terrorists and innocents lay slain. Two truths are wrapped together tonight in the land we call Holy. First, Hamas is a terrible, destructive and evil organization of terror whose terrorist attack on October 7th unleashed the horrors of war on those on the West Bank and Gaza. AND second, Israel's response against Hamas has devastated and utterly destroyed an entire people on a small strip of land – people who have nowhere to go, nowhere to hide and now have little food, water and hope. We too often will name one truth and forsake the other.

But the beast that slouches toward Bethlehem tonight calls us to speak two truths – not one. We cannot name one truth and be silent about the other one.

The land of Holiness is not the only place where two truths stumble along. In the United States tonight, we are faced with our own conflicting sets of truths as we stand at the doorway of 2024. We have a former President running for again for the Presidency with 91 counts of crimes stacked against him, who still denies he lost the last election and led an insurrection to prove it, running largely unopposed. And we have a weak, feeble looking and sounding, past his prime President ready to run for reelection as he seeks to serve until he is 86. Both are true – whether we want to be honest or not. Is this the best the greatness nation on earth can produce as we head into 2024? Along with too many Americans, the world must be wondering how we have allowed such darkness to descend on the politics of our times.

We live with many dueling truths. Here are two more.

In a few hours, our will open for Christmas Day and we will welcome God's highly favored ones - the dispossessed, the disinherited, the lonely and the poor. Along with hundreds of volunteers who seek to bring light, life and love to their neighbors, people will have Christmas right here. Self-admittedly, those who serve will receive much more than they give. The embodiment of the Light will be ever present – shared in the language of love from many different faiths and parts of the world. This is true. But also true is the growing number of people who are without homes, without family, without a place to call their own each night. The truth hurts when we and they can name aloud that - One meal, one day, cannot fill the gaps left by no place to call home. Two truths call us all to do the **work of mercy AND the work of justice.**

John, the understudy poet has come from the wings to center stage and cries to our hearts tonight. He is crying for us to wake up – to live God's truth in love. He is crying for us to name and claim Jesus as the Hope for the World. He is crying to us to fight back the darkness with the Light of God.

Like W.B. Yeats, John sees that things fall apart, that the center cannot hold when anarchy is unleashed and when “the blood-dimmed tide” is loosed, when “everywhere the ceremony of innocence is drowned,” when “the best lack all conviction” and “the worst are full of passionate intensity.”

Finally comes our poet, and unlike brother William, our Biblical poet John shows us that, not just the worst but also **THE BEST** are full of passionate intensity. He shows us that in the Divine Spark, Light overcomes darkness – every time. He shows us **the center can hold** if the Light of the World is in the center. He shows us that in the Light, shining on the edge of darkness, God exercises power as God's faithful, loving, committed accompaniment in vulnerability. And all of this is given by the poet to invite us to become more like the God who dwells among us, seeking to find a home in us.

In the Incarnation, God's two truths come together to make sense – *“All Things Came into Being Through Him” AND “the Light Shines in the Darkness and the Darkness did not overcome it.”*

God enacts the kind of divine love that enters empathetically into human experience, self-identifying with the glory and agony of human life from within and then identifying every day with the godless and the godforsaken everywhere in the world.

In Jesus, the Incarnation born in Bethlehem, God finds a way through the Darkness. God looks upon the Life, Light and Love of the world which God has created as our Incarnation, “the Word made flesh and dwelling among us” and God says – one more time – “This is good.” Amen.

