

“Christmas Takes God Off the Grid”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

11 December 2022

Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Isaiah 9:1-6

Luke 2:1-7

“And she gave birth to her firstborn son; and she wrapped him in swaddling clothes and laid him in a manger, because they had no room where they were lodging.”

~ Luke 2:7 (George M. Lamsa's Translations from the Aramaic of the Peshitta)

Prayer

**Calm us now, O Holy God, into a sacred quietness
That makes space for your Word in our hearts and in our minds. Amen.**

One of the widely popular definitions of insanity is “**doing the same thing over and over again and expecting a different result.**” This morning, on the Third Sunday of Advent, I can’t help but wonder if those of us who chose to attend a church service today are not all completely insane.

We do this every year. We set candles on a wreath, give them names impregnated with theological gravity – hope, peace, joy, and love, and then we saturate the whole month of December with sacred music, liturgies, Christian art, religious poetry and biblical messages that convey a profound sense of expectation. The opening lines of the Advent hymn we sang this morning give voice to the deepest longing we attach to this season, ***“Savior of the nations, come, show yourself the virgin’s son. Marvel, heaven, wonder, earth, that our God chose such a birth.”*** After the Tajimas lit the pink candle on the Advent wreath, we sang about a certain kind of joy that bubbles up from the birth of a Savior our tradition claims makes it possible for Christians to believe in a world where ***“The last shall be first and the weak shall be strong, and none shall be afraid.”*** And there is the passage from the prophet Isaiah, which we have been reading in different translations since the First Sunday of Advent, that speaks of the political aspirations of the Kingdom of Judah in the 8th century BCE but also points to our eschatological hope for the coming of the Messiah – ***“For a child has been born to us, a son has been given to us, and leadership is on his shoulders. And his name is called wondrous councilor, divine warrior, eternal father, prince of peace.”***¹

Every year, we enter this season of Advent bright-eyed, talking about a time of exciting, hopeful, watchful waiting, praying that the Christ Child that was born more than two millennia ago may somehow be born anew in our hearts, yearning to hear the story about the baby born in the little town of Bethlehem, wondering if that lovely Christmas promise of peace on Earth can one day finally come true, and then... Christmas Day comes and goes by and it appears as if our Advent waiting and the Christmas story were

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nothing more than a beautiful mid-winter dream. We wake up on December 26th and the world is still very much the same. We wait for Christmas on our Advent tiptoes, celebrate the birth of Christ with gorgeous poinsettias, splendid music and great fanfare on Christmas Eve, but nothing changes in the world.

Last Thursday night, I watched “*Till*” – the biographical film about Mamie Till-Mobley, the mother of Emmett Louis Till, the 14-year-old boy who was forcefully taken from his cousins’ home in 1955 by white supremacists after being falsely accused of verbally insulting and physically assaulting Carolyn Bryant, a 21-year-old white shopkeeper in Money, Mississippi. Bo, as Mamie affectionately called her only son, was beaten, tortured, shot and dumped in a river. When his disfigured body was found, Mamie embarked on a courageous fight to bring Emmett’s killers to justice, but a 12, all-white, all-male jury overlooked the savagery carried out by J.W. Milam and Roy Bryant. Till’s killers were acquitted. In January of 1956, less than a year after their trial, Emmett’s murderers admitted to the crime and confessed that they had lynched Till in an interview with *Look Magazine*. They were paid \$4,000 and lived the rest of their lives as free men. Carolyn Bryant was never held accountable for perjury and a gross exaggeration of her encounter with Emmett that led to his brutal death. At the end of the film, the first thing that popped into my head was to imagine those Southern jurors, after knowingly acquitting two killers to safeguard a culture of racial hatred, gathered in their churches on Christmas Eve year after year, happily intoning the words of “*O come, O come, Emmanuel*” – “***O come, Desire of nations, bind all peoples in one heart and mind; bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease; fill the whole world with heaven’s peace.***” Between 1877 and 1950, Mississippi recorded 581 lynchings of Blacks, the highest number among all the states. Since the year 2000, at least eight suspected lynchings of Black men and teenagers took place in Mississippi, according to court records and police reports.² Many Christmases came and went by and very little has changed in our world.

We have been lighting candles and whispering prayers for peace in Ukraine for almost 10 months now and the end of the war is nowhere in sight. In fact, Russia and the United States, Putin and Biden, appear to be determined to fight until the last Ukrainian life is sacrificed to advance their geopolitical, ideological and imperialistic ambitions. Since the Russian invasion, the U.S. alone has approved a \$66-billion aid package for Ukraine.³ As far as we know, hardly any intentional and persistent diplomatic effort has been made at peace talks. In the meantime, rising cost of food and climate change are pushing 146 million people in Africa to the brink of starvation.⁴ The Biden Administration has approved almost \$1.86 billion in humanitarian and development assistance to save African lives.⁵ It is not difficult to see where our priorities lie. Still, we keep doing what we have always done. This morning, once again, we have lit candles for hope, peace and joy and we are singing the same carol we always sing around this time of the year, “***Joy to the world! The Lord is come; let earth receive her King; let every heart prepare him room, and heaven and nature sing and heaven and nature sing.***”

Last Sunday, Andrew made a fascinating remark toward the end of his sermon. He noted that when the youth arrived in Boston on Friday to work with City Reach, there were 8,000 homeless people in the city. When they left on Saturday, there were still 8,000 shelter-less people living in the streets. Then Andrew said something that plunged me into deep theological reflection. He said that it is not our job to redeem the world, because only the coming Messiah, the Holy Child of our Christmas story, the son in Isaiah's oracle whose name is "***Wonderful Counselor, the Strength of God, Eternal Protector and Champion of Peace***"⁶ can do it. Only the Messiah can redeem our world. And, of course, this is exactly what the theology of the institutional Church instructs us to tell the people in the pews. That's the right and sound teaching to proclaim from the pulpit... but the question I wrestled with last Sunday was, "*Why is the world not redeemed yet?*" Jesus was born more than 2000 years ago. The Messiah already came! Why then is our hope for a better world, a brighter future, a fuller life, for justice, for lasting peace, for deep and genuine and contagious joy, for an end to hunger and homelessness, for human solidarity and the salvation of our world from war and climate catastrophe pinned to eschatology or to a very distant future at the end of times? Is it an exercise in insanity to come to church during Advent year after year to sing and speak about the biblical and theological expectation for a world transformed by the birth of Christ if we do not expect anything to change today? Is it insane to keep remembering the first Christmas and hoping for a future salvation while doing nothing of significance to change, transform, and save the world during our lifetime? Do we have a hand in bringing in the world of peace, hope, joy, love and justice that Christmas promises?

When the prophet Isaiah wrote those inspiring words about the child-king, he was not predicting the birth of a baby in Bethlehem some 7 centuries in the future. Isaiah was addressing the social, religious, political and military reality of the Kingdom of Judah in that very particular historical moment. The consensus among Biblical scholars is that this passage is part of a royal liturgy that announced and celebrated the coronation of Hezekiah, the son of King Ahaz whose geopolitical miscalculations and lack of trust in God turned his country into a vassal state of the Assyrian Empire. The accession of a new king to David's throne was a consequential moment for the whole nation. Isaiah saw God's "***great light***" beaming on this new day and hailed the new king as a sign of God's transformative and liberating power among his people. The prophet borrowed liberally and uncereceremoniously from the extravagant language of the enthronement of the Pharaohs of Egypt to give the new king a poetic, powerful and memorable throne name. The new king would be a discerning and shrewd guide – Wonderful Counselor; an earthly representative of God's power – Mighty God; a parental presence that brings stability and ensures ongoing care for the people – Everlasting Father; and bringer and preserver of peace – Prince of Peace.

Hezekiah's well-ordered rule did indeed enact policies that promoted justice and equity in Judah. And, for a time, he was able to spare his people from Assyrian violence and oppression. During his reign, it even seemed possible to believe in durable peace. But Isaiah's expectations for the new king could not be maintained in the long run. In fact, not a

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single king of Israel or Judah ever lived up to the high expectations of Isaiah's oracle. And this may have been the reason for God's subtle change in strategy. Rather than doing the same thing over and over again and hoping for different results, God does something radically new. I don't know if you ever noticed it, but there is a clear shift in the way God participates in the world in the Bible. In the Jewish Scriptures, God is deeply involved in a nation-building project. God establishes the legal, religious, moral and political foundations of Israel, appoints national rulers, anoints religious leaders, and raises prophets to speak to the nation on matters as varied as social justice and international affairs. Throughout the First Testament, God works tirelessly in and through the political and religious structures of society, hoping that, at some point, humanity may finally learn to pursue peace without making war, create prosperity without inequality, promote justice without overlooking the rights of the most vulnerable, engage in politics without serving only the interests of the rich, and work on social and political principles that protect and sustain life. Then, as the apostle Paul wrote to the Galatians, "**when the fullness of time came**,"⁷ God decided to work beyond the usual political and religious system. This is the theological meaning of the sentence, "**they had no room where they were lodging**" or, in the more familiar language of the same passage, "**there was no place for them in the inn.**"

Jesus was born beyond Caesar's reach and control. The Gospel of Luke reveals God's new strategy by reminding his readers that Jesus came into the world inconspicuously, quietly, anonymously, completely powerless, with no address, undocumented and unregistered. Caesar Augustus, the absolute leader of the global superpower of the time, had just issued a decree that all the people in his empire should be registered. The emperor wanted to develop a single registration system that would allow Rome to tax and control every person residing in imperial territory. This was Caesar's world and anyone who existed under the low-grade state of tyranny and authoritarian violence that made the Pax Romana possible would have to show up at their own hometowns, be counted and allow the empire to tighten its grip on their lives. And it is in this world controlled, ruled and taxed by Rome that God's dream for humanity became flesh. Luke hoped that we would notice the tension and irony in the story. On one side, we have Caesar Augustus and the administrative and military apparatus of the empire making a move to subjugate and dominate the whole Roman world. On the other side, Jesus comes, carrying in his body the world-transforming, subversive, heart-changing and life-saving love of God. The Roman emperor believed he held unrivaled and uncontested power over the world. Augustus even declared himself to be "*Divi Filius*" – "The Son of God." But the evangelist tells us that God chose to undermine the economic, political, theological, and social system of Rome. Jesus, God's true Son, the Messiah came into the world off the grid and Jesus taught, preached, and lived off the grid his entire life. He invited his followers to imagine a different kind of community, which he often defined as the Kingdom of God, where peace, hope, joy, love, freedom and justice are completely different from anything Caesar's empire ever offered. As Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann noted, Jesus exposed the old structures of the empire as fraudulent inventions designed to impose political rule by imperial fiat. And he defied and spoke

against those invented limitations and opened the world to a way of life and faith many deemed to be impossible.⁸

The first followers of this off-the-grid God revealed in Jesus were all Jewish men and women who knew well Isaiah's oracle and they began to notice in the ministry and actions of the young teacher from Nazareth signs of the child-king Isaiah had envisioned for Judah. There was a fresh newness in Jesus' teachings that was unique and different from everything they had seen before, so the disciples started to believe that Jesus was the light that shines in the darkness. They remembered the words about the son with the mantle of authority on his shoulders and imagined that Jesus was the long-expected child that would stand up against the Romans much like Hezekiah had faced the Assyrian Empire. Jesus, however, refused to fit nicely into people's expectations for the Messiah. He would not be the Wondrous Councilor that tweaks and adjusts the structures and systems of the nation to try to improve things just a little here and there. No, Jesus believed in extraordinary changes. And he had faith that his friends would be able to see and act beyond the conventional assumptions and wisdom of this world's power arrangements. Although the early church gave him the title of Wonderful Counselor that once belonged to one of Judah's kings, Jesus was more interested in putting God's Kingdom into operation. As British theologian N.T. Wright put it, "[Jesus came] **to get God's kingdom off the ground – or perhaps we should say, precisely on to the ground, in the real life of real people.**"⁹

For almost two millennia now, Christians have talked about Jesus as the wise, transformative, extraordinary and revolutionary Messiah that Isaiah hoped for in the 8th century BCE. What no one expected is that Jesus would be an off-the-grid "**Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.**" He certainly had no desire or intention to be king or part of the political structures and economic systems of his day; and Jesus also hoped that his disciples would stop participating blindly in the order of power, injustice, and violence of this world. For those of us who want to follow his teachings today, I would say that Jesus wanted us to keep working to make God's Kingdom happen to real people with real lives on this day. Christmas comes and nothing changes because our tendency is to expect that someone other than us will do the hard work of making the Kingdom come to our streets, our neighborhoods, our church and the world. Our expectation for the hope, peace, joy, and love of Advent and for the Christmas story to be real is only insane if we wait for someone else to speak against the invented limitations of our political systems and seek alternative and world-transforming ways to mend and heal this world that God loves. In fact, God loves this world so much that God came as a child born off-the-grid to show humankind that Christmas will never change anything unless we do something every day to bring God's Kingdom into our lives and human history. Jesus, our Wonderful Counselor, did not live and die to save a few souls from the wreck of this world. Jesus was born and gave his life so that the whole world might have life and have it in abundance.

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Christmas will come again and nothing will ever change if we do not change the way we celebrate Advent and Christmas. Our Wonderful Counselor was an off-the-grid Messiah who entrusted us with the mission to be his followers, his agents in the world and make God's Kingdom real for real people here and now. That's the mission strategy Jesus left for the Church. He called his disciples to follow him off-the-grid and become Kingdom-bringers. Our Wonderful Counselor put in our hearts a fresh, new, beautiful, world-transforming vision of how the world can be and Christ expects that his Church will not let Christmas keep coming and going without making an extraordinary difference in today's world. Christ still hopes that you and I will face the world as it is with the bright light of God's saving love.

Friends do not let Christmas come and go by without changing your life. The people who are living in darkness today need Christ-followers who are brave and wise and visionary enough to make the Kingdom happen in our time and in our reality. May we all find within us the courage to be off-the-grid Kingdom-bringers this Advent season. May our church, you and me, be as determined as Jesus was to make Christmas real in our world; make the light of hope, peace, joy and love shine and change the world of real people with real lives who long for the light that darkness cannot overcome.

May it be so. Amen.

¹ Robert Alter in The Hebrew Bible: Translation with Commentary, [Kindle edition].

² By DeNeen L. Brown in 'Lynchings in Mississippi never stopped', National, The Washington Post, 08 August 2021 [<https://www.washingtonpost.com/nation/2021/08/08/modern-day-mississippi-lynchings/>]

³ By Lori Robertson in U.S. Aid to Ukraine, Explained, FactCheck.org, 02 December 2022 [<https://www.factcheck.org/2022/12/u-s-aid-to-ukraine-explained/>].

⁴ British Red Cross in Africa food crisis: 146 million people are going hungry, Stories, 07 October 2022 [<https://www.redcross.org.uk/stories/disasters-and-emergencies/world/africa-hunger-crisis-100-million-struggling-to-eat>].

⁵ USAID in The United States Provides nearly \$1.3 Billion in Surge of Humanitarian and Development Assistance to the Horn of Africa, 18 July 2022 [<https://www.usaid.gov/news-information/press-releases/jul-18-2022-united-states-provides-nearly-1-3-billion-assistance-horn-of-africa>].

⁶ Isaiah 9:6 – The Inclusive Bible [The First Egalitarian Translation].

⁷ Galatians 4:4.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann in Names for the Messiah, p. 12 paraphrased [Kindle Edition].

⁹ N. T. Wright in The Government Shall Be Upon His Shoulders, sermon at the Midnight Eucharist on Christmas Eve 2008 in the Cathedral Church of Christ, Blessed Mary the Virgin and St Cuthbert, Durham.