

“A Child Has Been Born to Us”
 Acton Congregational Church (UCC)
 18 December 2022
 Rev. Paulo Gustavo França

Texts: Isaiah 9:1-6
 Luke 2:22, 25-35

“A child has been born to us”
 Isaiah 9:5a

Prayer
Draw us close to you, O Holy God,
And remind us once again of the power of words
To expand our minds,
Enlarge our hearts,
And lift our spirits.
Speak to us and startle us with the message of love
At the core of this Fourth Sunday of Advent. Amen.

In the final decades of the first century of the Christian Era, the evangelists who wrote the gospels of Matthew and Luke made an astonishing and history-splitting theological declaration. The Gospel writers put into writing the staggering assertion that the Word, wisdom, power, and love of God came into human history in the child of Mary. And for almost two millennia, the Church has kept alive this world-changing, intellectually challenging, theologically unsettling, and soul-stirring story about God in diapers. Christian theology came up with a more dignified and sanitized term to describe what took place in Bethlehem – Incarnation. But underneath the elevated concept of the Incarnation lies a simple account of a profoundly human event: a baby is born like countless other human babies. Matthew and Luke do not say anything about the child’s hair texture, skin tone, eye colors, weight or size. All we are told is that this Jewish baby born in a cowshed to poor parents in a far-flung town on the backside of the Roman Empire is God’s love in human flesh. Immanuel – God with us and among us. The holy and the human in one tiny body. A Savior with a soft spot on his head suckling at his mother’s bosom. The Divine in a powerless and helpless newborn utterly dependent on his parents to survive. A little child wrapped in a baby blanket, lying in a feed box and holding in each breath he takes the potential to show humankind everything that can be seen of God in a human being.

There is something disarmingly heart-warming and yet very powerful in the story of the birth of the Christ Child that sometimes gets lost amid the overly sentimentalized carols and ethereal theological language of the Incarnation. Both the prophet Isaiah and the Gospel writers have an unwavering faith that a child can bring the light of God to shine in the darkness of our world. Our Scriptures insist on declaring that a baby can grow up and teach humankind how to let what is best in us take on real flesh and become visible in our

living and in our way of life. At the core of our Christmas celebrations, there is the story of a little baby who becomes the long-expected Messiah born to save us from living something less than life because his own life shows us how we can make a commitment to keep on loving God, ourselves, our neighbors, the world, and even our enemies until a new dawn of hope brings a brilliant light to places enshrouded in gloom and all the footgear and battle dress uniforms are devoured by the flames of lasting peace and humankind is free to live in a world where no one dies for the lack of hope, kindness, compassion, solidarity, justice, peace, or love.

Sometimes, we overlook this important detail that the most significant part of the Christmas story is that God bets on a child to inspire humankind to be more alive, more hopeful, more loving, more peaceful, more joyful and more fully human.

Since the first Sunday of Advent, Andrew and I have been inviting you to reflect on Isaiah's titles for the Messiah in the passage Kyoko read this morning. The first followers of Jesus, who were mostly Jewish, were not as concerned about the facts that surrounded Jesus' birth as they were about what the birth meant to their faith and lives. As Frederick Buechner put it, ***"the Gospel writers are not really interested primarily in the facts of the birth but in the significance, the meaning for them of that birth, just as the people who love us are not really interested primarily in the facts of our births but in what it meant to them when we were born and how for them the world was never the same again, how their whole lives were charged with new significance."***¹

For the first disciples, Jesus of Nazareth was the crystallization of their deepest yearning for the Messiah the prophet Isaiah had imagined some 7 centuries in the past. They were quick to read into the life of Jesus the embodiment of the hopes and the fulfillment of the ancient prophecies of the Jewish tradition. Even though during his lifetime Jesus never claimed those messianic titles to himself, the nascent Christian movement believed that Jesus was the one who could bear the name, ***"The Mighty God is planning grace; The Eternal Father, a peaceable ruler."*** What the early Church wanted to affirm in a deeply subversive manner is that Jesus was a different kind of ***"Son of the Most High,"***² ***"Son of God,"***³ ***"Savior,"***⁴ ***"Lord"***⁵ and ***"Bringer of peace"***⁶ in a world where Caesar Augustus was venerated as "Son of the Divine," "Savior of the world," "Maker of Peace," and "the One who is to be worshipped." By the end of the first century, the Church was fully aware that Jesus and Caesar represented two very distinct social, political, economic and theological worldviews and for the community of Jesus' followers, Jesus was the one with real authority to reign over Israel, to be king. Jesus was the One God chose to fulfill Isaiah's vision of the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father and Prince of Peace. But there is no question that the most meaningful and world-transforming words in Isaiah's oracle are the ones that go by mostly unnoticed: ***"For a child has been born to us."***

Marian Wright Edelman, the founder and president emerita of the Children's Defense Fund, wrote in an essay entitled *"Standing Up for Children"* that ***"when God***

wants an important thing done in this world or a wrong righted, [God] goes about it in a very singular way. [God] doesn't release thunderbolts or stir up earthquakes. God simply has a tiny baby born, perhaps of a very humble home, perhaps of a very humble mother... and then—God waits. The great events of this world are not battles and elections and earthquakes and thunderbolts. The great events are babies, for each child comes with the message that God is not yet discouraged with humanity, but is still expecting goodwill to become incarnate in each human life.⁷

An infant in a manger is how Christmas reminds the Church that babies are the greatest events in human history. Simeon, in today's Gospel lesson, knew it. In his advanced age, at least this is how I imagine him, Simeon had not given up on the possibility that a child might have the potential to be a light to the nations, offer healing to our broken world, guide humankind in the way of peace, and empower the human race to give God's love a chance to transform, reform, renew, bless and redeem human relationships and life. I love what author Bill McKibben wrote about older people. He noted that we are used to the idea that as people age, we get more conservative. McKibben quoted a popular adage to make his case, ***"if you're not an idealist when you're twenty you have no heart; if you're still one at thirty you have no head,"*** or he added ***"at least no bank account."*** Then Bill McKibben turned around and said that this aphorism needs amending now that we are living longer. ***"If you're not an idealist when you're seventy or eighty you have no grandkids."***⁸ What McKibben meant is that we cannot stop dreaming about a better future for the children of the world just because we are older, more cautious, and set in our ways. Anyone who has kids or grandkids understand that we cannot stop investing our time, energy and resources to create a future that offers hope rather than climate disaster, peace rather than violence and war, love rather than discrimination and intolerance, full life rather than childhood poverty and starvation, redemption rather than an inexorable march toward destruction and extinction. Even though he would not be there to see the person Jesus would become, Simeon allowed his imagination to run wild, and he bet on the life of the baby in Mary's arms. Simeon made a choice to believe that Jesus would embody God's dream for a world where every child lives up to her full potential to prepare humankind not for the worst in human history, but the best possible way to live on our planet, sharing the earth's resources, preserving life and opening our hearts to God's love.

Biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann says that congregations have a crucial role in betting on the potential of children and molding the human beings of tomorrow. ***"There are many others who will teach children the way to 'succeed,' or 'do well' or 'make a good living,'"*** Brueggemann pointed out in a reflection he wrote, but churches have the responsibility to cultivate the potential in every child to incarnate goodwill, practice kindness, do justice, work for peace, love the neighbor, and hold every life as a sacred gift from the Creator. In the church, we have to believe that every child has the latent capacity to change the world for the better. As people who 21 centuries later still gather to remember the story of the baby of Christmas, we have to be idealists and embrace wholeheartedly the Church's ministry of betting on the life of babies because we know that

Sermons are meant to be preached and, therefore, all sermons are prepared with the emphasis on verbal presentation rather than on proper grammar and punctuation required of written documents.

when God wants something important, life-saving, world-transforming done, God waits for a child to be born. It is up to us to nurture the faith of every child and believe that the children in our lives, in our congregation and the children of the world can grow up to be messengers and vessels and instruments of God's saving love in human history.

There is a film called "*Martian Child*" that is an all-time favorite in my household. The movie weaves together the lives of a popular science-fiction writer whose wife has died and the socially awkward boy he adopts. The child pretends that he arrived on Earth from Mars to deal with the heartbreaking reality of being abandoned by his biological parents. To protect himself from the sun, he spends all day in a large cardboard box, which very appropriately has the words "**FRAGILE – handle with care**" printed on it in big, bold letters. Besides being afraid of the sun and wearing a weight belt to keep him from floating up into space, the "Martian kid" steals other people's cherished mementoes and carries a Polaroid instant camera everywhere he goes to snap pictures of people, places, and everything else he sees. When his adoptive father asks him why he takes so many photos, the child says that he is learning to be a human being and part of a family. At the end of the film, the father played by actor John Cusack makes this touching observation: ***"Sometimes we forget that children have just arrived on the earth, and they are a little like aliens; coming into being as bundle of energy and pure potential; here on some kind of exploratory mission and they are just trying to learn what it means to be human."***⁹

What I like about this comedy-drama is that it speaks of a deep concern for the wellbeing of every child regardless of whether they are related to us biologically or not. We all share the responsibility to teach children that despite all the complexities and complications in human relationships and in our world, we are here on a mission to help each other become better, more loving, more forgiving, more caring, more faithful and more idealistic people. Our awareness of God's love that became flesh in the child of Bethlehem calls on us to keep on betting on the life of every child. The world might have assumed that Caesar Augustus because of his birth into a powerful, wealthy, well-connected, influential and privileged family would be the child that could completely change the direction of history, but it was Jesus, the poor baby whose crib was a trough, that divided history into two eras. When you greet 2023, we will be also counting how many years have gone by since Mary gave birth to her firstborn son, wrapped him in bands of cloth and laid him in a manger. The late Rev. William Sloane Coffin said that two thousand years later, we still find difficult to comprehend the message of Christmas, that greater than Caesar Augustus, the man worshipped as god, is the love of God that became flesh in the child of the manger. Better than all the armies of Caesar is the poor child of Bethlehem who has inspired millions of followers to do everything for peace to prevail on earth without ever resorting to violence.¹⁰

Friends, every child comes into the world as a bundle of pure energy and potential. Mary and Joseph knew it. As the Gospel of Luke says, upon hearing Simeon praising God for what Jesus would do in human history, ***"father and mother were amazed at what was***

being said about him.” The birth of every child should amaze us because any child can become the human being God will choose to nudge humanity toward the promise of peace on Earth and goodwill among people the angels proclaimed on the first Christmas. Every child can become a person that gives flesh and bones to God’s love. Every child can do something important to bring a brilliant light into the darkness of human history. As adults who have been caught up in the sacred story of the life of the child of Christmas, our mission is to give children a safe and sacred space where they can learn to be part of the human family, real human beings who can live as fully and love as passionately as Jesus did.

If we look closely and carefully, we will see that every single baby comes with those words written on them “***Fragile - handle with care.***” And yet, every single one of them also comes asking nothing harder from us than that we love them and be idealistic enough to bet on their potential to save us from living without having ever lived the full, beautiful, hopeful, joyful, peaceful and loving life God intends for every human being on earth. This Christmas, be an idealist and bet on the life of Isabella, the children in your life, the children around you, and on the future of humankind and our planet. Hundreds of children have been born to us this day. Their births are the most important event in human history because they are the embodiment of our faith that God is with us. Christmas is still happening all over the world. The world is with child and there is hope for the light to shine in the darkness and show all of us, even the oldest, least idealistic and most conservative among us, how to be fully and beautifully human in the presence of God.

May it be so. Amen and Amen.

¹ Frederick Buechner in Secrets in the Dark, “Come and See,” p. 53.

² Luke 1:32.

³ Luke 1:35.

⁴ Luke 2:11.

⁵ Luke 2:11.

⁶ Luke 2:14.

⁷ Paul Loeb in The Impossible Will Take a Little While: A Citizen's Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear, article by Marian Wright Edleman “Standing Up for Children,” location 616 [Kindle Edition].

⁸ Bill McKibben in The Flag, The Cross and The Station Wagon, p. 212 [Kindle Edition].

⁹ Martian Child 2007.

¹⁰ William Sloane Coffin in The Collected Sermons of William Sloane Coffin, Vol. 2, “The Rebirth of Hope, The Hope of Rebirth,” p. 475.