

## SERMON: “For Unto Us ....”

First United Church, Waterloo

Rev. Harry Disher

Sunday, December 26, 2021

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*PRAYER: “Amazing God, in Jesus, the Christ-child, you have given us all of yourself. Open us again this holy night to the promise and possibility of giving ourselves fully to you that you might make us whole and holy. Amen”*

There is ordinary time, and there is this momentous time.

There is time after time after time, and there is time beyond time or time out of time.

This time, Christmas time, is always momentous time, time out of time.

Christmas calls into question and reframes almost everything in everyday, ongoing, human time.

Christmas is always proclamation time: *“For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Liberator, who is Christ the Sovereign One.” (Luke 2:11)*

News like that tends to be life-altering, world-altering news.

It beckons us not only to pay attention but also to take it seriously to heart.

It has a lot of precedents.

### I ISAIAH OF JERUSALEM versus KING AHAZ

One of those precedents was a proclamation delivered some 720 years previously.

It came from a chosen messenger of God named Isaiah.

It came during the time when the once united realm of Israel

had become divided into two separate states: Israel to the north with Samaria as its capital and Judah to the south with Jerusalem as its capital.

It was a time of widespread political instability, corruption, and spiritual and social decay.

When King Ahaz came to sit on the throne of Judah in Jerusalem, those conditions got worse.

At that time Assyria rose up to become the dominant Empire in the Middle East.

Isaiah and the people of Judah witnessed the Assyrian takeover of the northern realm of Israel and the fall of Samaria in the year 722 BCE.

They knew that it was only a matter of time before the same fate would befall Judah.

Through a series of politically dumb manoeuvres, Ahaz hastened that day and made it more traumatic than it might otherwise have been.

Ahaz sold off some of the treasures of the Temple to help pay tribute taxes to the Empire.

He encouraged the adoption of Assyrian cultic practices through the nation and set up altars to Assyrian deities in the midst of God’s Temple.

And, he even invited Assyria into a military alliance against Egypt which was a way of giving Emperor Tiglath-Pileser III and his armies *carte blanche* to invade and take over without a struggle and impose Assyrian rule and culture on Judah.

All that caused Isaiah to dig down deep into his treasured spiritual memories and cherish the one where God promised a righteous descendant of King David would someday come to rule God’s people in perpetuity.

He would fashion Israel into an exemplary nation where godly community would be fully practiced and experienced.

A nation like that would be the polar opposite to Judah under King Ahaz:

*“The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light .... (Isaiah 9:2a)*

God would someday engineer the end of the days of Israel’s oppression and corruption, and that righteous ruler would come into power:

*“Unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government shall be upon his shoulders. And he shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Parent, Prince of Peace. His authority shall grow continually and there shall be endless peace ... He will establish and uphold it with justice and righteousness from this time onward and forevermore.” (Isaiah 9:6-7)*

A rather overblown, exaggerated vision perhaps, but certainly a proclamation and a plea for a completely different way of running a country, a way that might spill over into creating a whole new world.

In fact, a son had already been born to King Ahaz in the year 729 BCE.

His name was Hezekiah and when he came to the throne at age 25 he worked hard to undo a lot of the corruption and damage his father had caused.

There were truly reasons for higher hopes.

However, Hezekiah became preoccupied with the possibility of mounting an armed resistance to Assyria with the help of others.

Just not a good plan at the time.

Count on God instead, Isaiah kept on crying. Over time, God will set us free.

Over time, God will establish that realm and world of true harmony, justice, and peace.

## II GREAT EXPECTATIONS

*“For unto you is born this day, in the city of David, a Deliverer .... ”*

*“For unto us a child is born! Unto us a son is given ...*

*and his name shall be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, ... Prince of Peace!”*

Great proclamations. Great expectations.

They take us to the edge of momentous time, time out of time.

I can feel it still hanging in the air this morning, can you?

These are mythic or symbolic stories are they not of how the arrival of a baby changes everything?

The birth of a child alters family values and timetables instantly.

The birth of a child can also alter community values, can call us into deeper, richer community.

Isn’t that why some young families turn to a church community like this one?

Isn’t it because they seek spiritual support and help in raising that child?

Isn’t the wisdom given us by some African tribes ringing true: that it takes a whole village to raise a child?

When a child is born we focus not only on the present but also on the future, on the kind of future we hope that child will have, on the kind of future we hope that child will have a hand in creating.

Our First Nations people continually share their conviction with us that any action taken should be considered for its impact on the next seven generations.  
In a world still teetering on the brink of ecological collapse  
it is a momentous time for all of us to commit ourselves  
to loving and nurturing our planet back to health like never before,  
to ensuring that any international accord regarding reversing climate change  
gets adhered to, or does even better than expected.  
The God who envisions a creation teeming with fullness of life is drawing us there.  
Already the kind of leadership our sickened and overly-frightened world so sorely needs  
may have been born, may be in process of growing up among us.  
And the governance shall fall upon their shoulders!  
If we too take steps in such an altered direction, we can help it happen.  
Even baby steps matter lots.  
For indeed the very image of God resides already in each of us.  
The manger potential of our own becoming something like God incarnate is already ours.  
Let us tap into it and seek to live it.

A Rad Bradbury novel, *Farewell Summer*, revolves around a warring town  
where young men and old men are at loggerheads.  
Near summer's end there is a town picnic.  
Doug, the leader of the younger group, converses with other young men  
as they plot their next move against the old fogies.  
As they march toward the picnic grounds, Doug has a flash of memory.  
He remembers the day he killed a butterfly and got his grandfather's shocked reaction.  
"Remember", Doug's grandfather told him, "always, everything moves."  
When they arrive at the picnic, Doug approaches an old man sitting in a wheel chair.  
He had thought he would instigate trouble by tipping him out of his chair.  
Instead, he takes up a piece of cake from a nearby table and offers it to the man.  
Quietly, the old man murmurs his surprised thanks.  
One of Doug's friends is appalled wondering how he could do such a thing.  
Doug remains silent and unresponsive and leads the gang away.  
All the while Doug is thinking to himself, "Because, well, I could hear him breathe." /

Light can still dawn on people who have been walking in darkness.  
Hope can yet come into bloom like flowers appearing in the desert.  
God's commonwealth potential can continue to sprout and grow.

## CONCLUSION

We have seen our share of well-intentioned but still-flawed Hezekiahs,  
and some culprits capable of Ahaz-style corruption in our nation's Parliament Hill.  
There has been no end of Tiglath-Pileser IIIs and Sargon IIs sitting in seats of power  
or an Oval Office, determined to forge their nation into some form of world-dominating empire.

Here's an alternative news flash: "*For unto us a child is born! Unto us a son is given! ...*"  
"*For unto you is born this day, in the city of David,*  
*One who can turn things around, Christ the Sovereign One.*"

Out of great proclamations rise great expectations –  
they are trumpet calls heralding a momentous time, time out of time, time beyond time,  
unlike ordinary everyday time. Christmas is always such a time –  
a chock-full-of-potential for a wildly different future kind of time.

Christmas is God's gift to the world as long as there is time.

And there is time for us to be God's gift to the world in which we live,  
time for us to act as if God's whole, new world is already here and possible.

For, indeed, it is.

It begins here and now again even in the midst of this still-lingering pandemic  
where that grown child invites us to find the paths that lead to peace, justice, right relationships.

It begins again as you and I take our turn kneeling at the manger  
of a swaddled infant asleep on the hay

because, well ... I can hear him breathe. Can you?

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#### *Notes*

1 *Rad Bradbury, Farewell Summer, (William Morrow Co., New York, NY: 2004), p. 145-146.*