

***“I Would Plant a Tree”***  
***Advent I, December 2, 2018***

First Congregational United Church of Christ  
Eagle River, Wisconsin

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One of the occupational hazards of being a pastor, particularly the pastor of a congregation as diverse in opinion and theology as this one is, is the sneaking suspicion that when I rise to deliver a sermon, some members of the congregation may fear that I will be too political, while other members of the congregation may fear that I won't be political enough. Both expectations, or fears, are the result of what I think is our tendency to compartmentalize our faith and our politics. For some of us, there is the expectation that the church should be a refuge from politics, one of those precious places where the noise of the news, the shouting voices of advocates and adversaries cannot penetrate the thick and hallowed walls of our sanctuary. For others, it is the firm belief that the church can't, and shouldn't, try to escape from politics, because our politics have to do with the actual lives we live, that if we can't deal with real life in the church, then what good is the church?

Well, if you like compartmentalization in your life: nice, neat boundaries between what belongs in church and what doesn't, between the sacred and the secular, or the religious and the political, then Advent probably isn't the season for you—that is, if we approach Advent as a season in and of itself, and not as simply the “pre-Christmas season” or the cake before we get to the icing.

Let me explain. Let's start with Luke, the gospel-writer we'll be following through this church year, which begins today. In the first chapters of his gospel, Luke artfully interweaves the accounts of the births of John the Baptist and Jesus. He tells how those births were announced to their parents-to-be by the angel Gabriel, how both births would

be, each in its own way, miraculous: John was going to be born of elderly parents; and Jesus to a virgin teenager. Luke tells us how both John's father and Jesus' mother sang songs of praise that spoke not only of religious fulfillment but also of political vindication. That's the first hint of the political background to Jesus' birth and what leads up to it.

The second hint is that Luke places the births of both John and Jesus firmly within the real world of history, not in some mythical "once upon a time" land. Zechariah, John's father, has his visitation from the angel Gabriel "during the days of Herod the King." Herod was what we might call a local dynast, actually, in his character, more of a petty dynast. He was an appointee of the Roman emperor. He was nominally Jewish—he built a magnificent temple—but morally he was decisively un-Jewish. We learn something of Herod's character from historians who tell us that he had a thing about gold, and that he wasn't overly scrupulous in being faithful to his marital vows. (He was married ten times.) And, of course, we learn from Luke and from the other Gospels, that he was cruel, and that his cruelty stemmed from his deep insecurity. The worst example of that cruelty was the massacre of little boys who were born in a certain place at a certain time, one of whom might become the real king of the Jews. So when Luke mentions Herod in his biography of Jesus, he evokes memories of a small and fearful man who had power, a tyrant who was a murderer and who in turn was the founder of a dynasty of murderous tyrants, one of whom killed John the Baptist and played a role in the execution of Jesus. So, Luke's reference to Herod is not just an interesting historical footnote. It establishes part of the political context for both Jesus' and John's ministries.

And Jesus, we're told by Luke, was also born during the reign of Caesar Augustus. Caesar was a legend in his own mind—not just the overseer of a vast empire, but someone who considered himself to have been divinely chosen to be the emperor. In fact Caesar considered himself to be both chooser and chosen. Caesar told his subjects that he was God; and that he expected to be treated as such. He expected not just to be obeyed

but to be worshipped. He was, after all, the Prince of Peace (yes, he called himself that), the maintainer of the Pax Romana, the “Roman Peace.” The Roman Peace was not a peace that was based on fuzzy intangibles like “justice” or “freedom.” The Roman Peace was based on naked power, on imperial power that was enforced by military and economic power. Peace will be our theme next week, but for now let’s just say that the Roman Peace was predicated on profits for Roman oligarchs and on everyone else’s knowing their predetermined place in the scheme of things and being content to stay in that place.

And, here’s the kicker: Caesar called himself *Soter*, “savior.” So when the angel announced to a group of lowly shepherds that a Savior had been born to them, it was downright subversive: a savior who was not the emperor? And a savior whose birth was announced to the humblest of people, simple provincial shepherds, hicks, near or at the bottom rung of society? A savior born in a feedbox for animals and not in a plush bed in a lush palace? Luke’s vision of the angels in the skies over Bethlehem, their promise of a Savior who would bring hope and good will to all people, including and especially the poorest and the most downcast—all this was both the realization of Mary’s song and the explicit repudiation of imperial pretense.

Advent is a tricky season: it’s tricky because it is tempting to treat it simply as prelude to the big event of Christmas, but it’s tricky also because the themes of our Sundays in Advent—hope, peace, joy and love—are shadowed by deceptive impostors. We’ll talk about them each in its turn. Today’s theme, hope, for example, is often confused with optimism. Optimism is based upon a sunny reading of the facts. Optimism is like one of Mark Twain’s characters, who “had all the confidence of a Christian, holding four aces.”

Hope is something else entirely. Of hope, St. Paul says, “Hope that is seen is not hope at all. For why hope for something that you already have?” As my late beloved pastor, William Sloane Coffin liked to say, “The person who says, ‘I used to be an incurable

optimist, but now I'm cured,' is a person who is ready for hope." Hope is not about probability; it's about possibility. And because of that, hope is profoundly counter-intuitive.

One of the places I loved to visit in my old life was the Hagia Sophia, formerly church, then mosque, now museum in Istanbul. Built under the direction of the Byzantine Emperor Justinian, it was supposed to be a monument of faith, but in reality it was a monument to the power and wealth of the emperor. The most striking mosaics in this ancient church are portrayals of Christ *pantokrator*, the Ruler of the World, and of the emperor himself, and unless you look really closely, you can't tell the two apart. At a certain point, you see, the open-ended hope that lies at the heart of the improbability of Christ as savior, became something more akin to optimism about Christian success. In other words, the Roman Empire didn't become more Christian; the Christians became more imperial. Hope has to leave room for divine action; if it doesn't, it's not hope.

Let me illustrate what I'm trying to say with a personal reflection on our recent elections in this country. Actually, it's a personal testimony, and it's not really about the elections themselves. On November 6, Election Day, I read an article in the New York Times that described the elections as provoking fear throughout the electorate. It didn't matter whether you were a Democrat or a Republican, or neither. People were afraid, even if they were afraid of different things. The two things that we all had in common, it seems, were anger and fear. And I freely confess that I was in the spirit of that day. I fretted through the evening, watching the returns come in, but then, with almost nothing decided, I decided to go to bed. Pat had made that wise decision a couple hours earlier.

I went to bed because I concluded that what would happen would happen whether or not I watched it happen, but more important than that, I decided that my obsessive watching of the news of that evening was a symptom of my failure to hope, not to hope for a particular outcome, but to hope for a faithful response to whatever the outcome would be.

In other words, I realized that if I succumbed to the spirit of the day, to all that fear and anger, as opposed to the spirit of love and trust that lies at the heart of the good news, and, yes, of the coming season, I would be allowing my fear to overwhelm my hope. And so, I went to bed without knowing how things would turn out, and actually singing words of one of my favorite hymns to myself—Pat was asleep, after all. Here is the refrain, now sung aloud and probably not all that well: “No storm can shake my inmost calm, when to that rock I’m clinging. For Love is lord of heaven and earth. How can I keep from singing?” And I slept well. Love is lord of heaven and earth: not Herod, not Caesar, not,, well, you can fill in the blank for our time.

According to tradition, Martin Luther was once asked what he would do if he knew that the world would end the next day. Luther’s reputed reply was, “I would plant a tree.” I don’t want to rain on a Lutheran parade; but no one has discovered evidence that Luther actually said this; but even if he didn’t, it would have been a faithful and wonderful thing for him to say. The image on our screen is the image of a new sprout growing from the stump of a dead tree. It is an image of hope, of possibility overwhelming probability.

Love, embodied in Jesus Christ, is lord of heaven and earth. It’s not that everything will turn out all right; in fact every thing may not turn out all right; but our hope is what the angels sang to the shepherds. Our hope, our longing, is Emmanuel. It’s God with us. It’s love incarnate. That’s our hope; and that’s our assurance. Emmanuel. It’s what we sang and prayed to begin our worship and to begin Advent: “O Come, O Come, Emmanuel.” Amen.