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Sermon: Brothers and Sisters
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St. Michael's UCC, Baltimore, Ohio
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Isaiah 63:7-9, Hebrews 2:10-18

What an odd time of the year this is! We have concluded the season of Advent, the first Sunday of which is the New Year's Day, the first day, of the Christian liturgical calendar. And we are now only a very few days away from New Year's Day, the first day of the secular calendar.

It is a kind of in-between time. The excitement of Christmas Eve and Christmas Day has largely come and gone even though we continue in a residual kind of Christmassy spirit. We look ahead eagerly to the excitement of that one last tick of the clock in 2025 and the first tick of the clock in 2026.

I find that this in-between time is a good time for thinking more deeply about my life, about my family, and about our culture and our times. I think of it as a kind of "time-out" when our schedules slow down and the slower pace makes room for deeper thoughts about who we are and who we might want to be.

The Jewish people to whom Third Isaiah prophesied were in a kind of in-between time. The first returning exiles had left Babylon after six decades of captivity in Babylon, and later exiles would have spent even more time in that alien land. They were returning to a city that had been smashed, literally, with very little, if any, of the city's buildings still standing.

The returning exiles faced the daunting task of rebuilding their city, their Temple and their lives. And that rebuilding did not go well, nor did it go easily, nor did it go without struggle. The slowness and difficulty of the work was demoralizing, and the people needed encouragement. Third Isaiah offered the people encouragement, beginning with calling to everyone's mind the moments from the past when God had saved the people from troubles of all sorts. "I will recount the gracious deeds of the LORD, the praiseworthy acts of the LORD, because of all that the LORD has done for us, ..."

For Third Isaiah God was the Savior God "... his presence ... saved them; in his love and in his pity he redeemed them; he lifted them up and carried them all the days of old." Remember how God had saved the people in their exodus from Egypt, how he had made them a nation at Mt. Sinai, how he had established David and his throne in perpetuity as the ruler of the Jewish people, and so much more. And now God had delivered his people from exile in Babylon.

Why had God done that? God had shown "great favor to the house of Israel ... according to his mercy, according to the abundance of his steadfast love." It was not because of anything the Jewish people had done. They were disobedient, rebellious, idolatrous and not greatly to be

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relied upon. Rather God saved his people because of who God was, merciful and steadfastly loving.

In our deep thinking during this in-between time, that is the bedrock we reach when we plumb the depths. The central fact of existence is the God of Israel, good and gracious and loving beyond all measure, even when God's people do not live up to their promises of faithfulness to God. God is steadfast even when we are not.

Why are we not faithful in our promises to God? Tough question and the answers are numerous. But I believe they all boil down to one thing. We are not willing to make God central in our lives. We put ourselves in God's place. We trust in our own means and measures in an effort to control our fates, our lives, and the lives of those around us. For the entirety of human existence, that effort has failed. It always fails. It fails because we are not the center, God is the center. Failure to acknowledge God as Savior means failure to be the people God wants us to be ... fully human, fully alive.

The Jewish exiles returned from Babylon more than 2500 years ago. Their efforts to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple eventually succeeded, after 500 years or so. The Temple was a grand and glorious building, perhaps the largest building in the world at the time. In its own way it was the priests' and the people's way of controlling God, giving God a magnificent place to inhabit, in the midst of his people.

But the Temple and the activities supporting it did not please God. God was moved to show the people the proper way to house God. God sent his only begotten son to be the kind of Temple God wanted. God sent Jesus who was completely human to live and teach and preach the kind of life God wants for all of Jesus' brothers and sisters.

The Jewish Temple in Jerusalem had become the site of sacrifices to God but that sacrificial worship was supported by financial and political policies that oppressed the people and violated God's commandments. Jesus threw the moneychangers out of the Temple. This act, known as the Cleansing of the Temple, occurred at the end of his ministry, with accounts in Matthew 21:12–17, Mark 11:15–17, Luke 19:45–48, and John 2:13–16. Remember what Jesus said when he expelled them (Mt 21:13) “My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a den of robbers.”

Why did God feel that it was necessary to send us a Savior in human form? Well, again, there are lots of theories but the one I support is the one offered by the author of Hebrews ... “to make a sacrifice of atonement for the sins of the people.”

No matter how many sacrifices the priests made in the Temple in Jerusalem, it would never be enough to atone for the sins of the people, from the time we first evolved on the planet to the present and including the sins of those yet unborn. And God wants us to be about God's work in stewarding Creation, not in spending all our time in satisfying religious regulations and sacrifices.

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God sent Jesus not to offer sacrifices but to be the one and final sacrifice to atone for all that sin. And only someone who lived as human could know and incorporate all the sinfulness of humanity. And only the perfect human, the sinless human that Jesus was, could come to God as the ultimate sacrifice. God is perfect good and cannot tolerate evil. Only the perfect human could serve as the sacrifice.

And so, God took on flesh. God became human in the person of Jesus of Nazareth. The enormity of human sin was such that only God in human form could atone, could bridge the gap between God and humanity that the sin had created.

The author of Hebrews puts it this way. “Since, therefore, the children share flesh and blood, he himself likewise shared the same things, so that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and free those who all their lives were held in slavery by the fear of death.”

Speaking of deep thoughts!! Throughout human history the gods have never cared a fig for human beings, concerned only with their own pleasures and amusements. Humans tried to attract their attention and their favor by building huge temples in which they could dwell and by having great feasts and gatherings so that they might be fed and entertained. Now, here come the Jews and the Christians, offering knowledge of a God who out of pure grace and love cares for the people. Indeed, this God sacrificed his very son that the people might be saved from fear and its oppression. The Christian God does not want slaves who cater to him but free people who out of gratitude joyfully commit themselves to service in the name of the one who gave his life for us.

What I have just shared with you is the product of hundreds of years meditation and study by faithful Christians. It was not the view shared by the people of Jesus’ time. They had to come to know him. By his teachings and his example, they had to come to appreciate what God had done in bringing this Messiah to them. And in fact, it took several generations for people to understand the world-changing meaning of the birth of a baby at the far end of an Empire that took no notice whatsoever. Indeed, we are still studying the Bible to more fully know God’s purposes.

Consider the last line of our reading from Hebrews today. “Because he himself was tested by what he suffered, he is able to help those who are being tested.”

Not only did God come to us in human form, take our sins upon himself, and die for the atonement of our sins, but the author of Hebrews also tells us that Jesus is able to help those who are being tested. How can a dead man help us?

Jesus can help us every time we read the Scriptures, perhaps especially the Gospel accounts of his life and ministry. We also believe that through the Holy Spirit we have access to the risen and ascended Jesus who, at God’s right hand, intercedes for us with God the Father.

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More deep thoughts!! We are connected to Jesus. We are connected to a man who was born of a woman and who lived and was murdered horribly two thousand years ago. That man, born a baby in Bethlehem, can free us from sin and fear and oppression. That man can make us a free people!!

That man was God, the Son. And, incredibly, he is our brother. We are his sisters and brothers. We are part of God's family. God not only loves us, but he has also given us a human family ... one that extends back through all time and forward into eternity. We have our biological families. We have our families of choice, the friends we have made outside our family of origin. And we have our Christian family.

What does it mean to think about being part of our Christian family? That family, numbering at the present more than two billion people, but also including the tens of billions of the faithful now deceased and those faithful waiting to make their entrance into human history.

In this in-between time, knowing that we are part of a believing family with billions of sisters and brothers, ought to give us pause. Those people are part of Jesus' family, the very Jesus born during this season so long ago.

Well, it ought to make us want to know more about our brothers and sisters. These are not strangers, they are family. Where have they been? What have they been doing? How do they live? How do they worship? What are their successes? Their failures and their problems?

It ought to make us want to help our brothers and sisters who are in need. Are they hungry? We should work to make sure that they can feed themselves. Are they uneducated? How can we help them to greater access to secular and religious knowledge? Are they healthy? How can we help spread medical knowledge and advance it so that lives are less painful and longer?

It ought to make us think carefully about God's Creation that supports God's enormous family. How can we steward God's Creation to access the resources God has made available without doing damage to that same Creation? How can we save and preserve Creation for the faithful yet to be born?

It ought to make us work harder than ever towards resolving our differences peacefully and without violence. Imagine how agonizing it must be for God to see his family at war with one another. Yes, sometimes, war is necessary to combat evil and to protect the innocent but most of humanity's wars do not meet that threshold requirement. We need to be much less casual in our reliance on the use of force and instead be more intentional about, where possible, finding common ground where coercion is shunned.

Let us pray: Dearest Savior God, in this in-between time when our sometimes-frantic lives have slowed, help us to consider the words of your Scripture carefully, prayerfully. Deepen our understanding of your purposes for our lives and encourage us to enthusiastically be about improving the lives of our brothers and sisters in your glorious family. Amen.