

## Advent Confidence

Gene McAfee  
Faith United Church of Christ  
Richmond Heights, Ohio

The Second Sunday of Advent  
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Malachi 3:1-4; Philippians 1:3-11; Luke 3:1-6

Text: "I am confident of this, that the one who began a good work among you will bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ." -- Philippians 1:6

Last Wednesday evening, our reading group discussed Corrie Ten Boom's celebrated memoir, *The Hiding Place*. This classic of Christian biography and witness tells the story of the Ten Boom family's decision to hide Jewish people during the Nazi occupation of Holland and the awful price they paid for that decision. Corrie, her sister, Betsie, and their elderly father were arrested and sent to concentration camps for their so-called criminal activity, and only Corrie survived the horrors of the camps to tell the tale of her family's heroism.

The title of the book refers both to that secret room in the Ten Boom home where Jewish people were hidden from their pursuers, and also to the place, unique to each of us, where God meets us, shelters us, and gives us strength for life's challenges and even its ordeals. The title comes from a prophecy in the book of Isaiah, who refers to a future righteous ruler as "a hiding place from the wind and a covert in the tempest . . . the shadow of a great rock in a weary land" (Isaiah 32:2).

For Corrie and her family, of course, who were evangelical Christians steeped in the theology and practice of the Dutch Reformed Church, that hiding place was God as experienced by them in Jesus Christ.

The hiding place for Christians like the Ten Boom family was not some sort of safe retreat from the world, nor was it the kind of invisibility that comes from going along to get along.

The hiding place of Jesus Christ for this family was that spiritual encounter that each of them made daily with their crucified and risen savior. At their core, the Ten Booms were hidden, sheltered, and protected from all the deadliest forces human evil can devise because of their relationship with the God who had suffered before them, suffered with them, and was powerful enough to keep their suffering from destroying them. These evangelical Christians literally gave their lives sheltering Jews, and much of our discussion last Wednesday turned on where such strength comes from and why more of us who call ourselves Christian don't display it.

Let me speak this morning, briefly, to the first of those questions: Where does the strength come from to live a Christian life of extraordinary witness?

In the first place, I don't think people who live such lives consider them extraordinary; they simply believe they're living the kind of life that Jesus calls them to.

One of the marks of the genuine saint is the saint's desire not to be a saint. Saints, heroes, extraordinary Christian believers – they simply think of themselves as ordinary followers of Jesus Christ. They recognize that their lifestyle may be distinctly in the minority, but they don't think of themselves as morally superior to the people among whom they live. They don't think of themselves as super-Christians. They think of

themselves simply as Christians, responding to the needs of the world around them as God gives them the strength to do so following the example of Jesus.

And that's the second point that needs stressing when we speak of Christian strength. In every case that I know of, Christians of extraordinary strength attribute their ability to a power beyond themselves. They do not claim to be able to do what they do based on their own abilities. The strength they need and receive comes from without, and that, I think, is why Paul could tell the Philippians in this morning's text that he was confident that the one who had begun a good work in them would bring it to completion by the day of Jesus Christ.

Paul wasn't expressing his confidence in the Philippians themselves; he was expressing his confidence in God's ability to work with and through those Philippians to bring about a work whose end none of them could have envisioned.

Think about it for a moment. Imagine yourself as part of a small house church of Jewish or Gentile people who are convinced that a Jew named Jesus, a carpenter-turned-teacher-and-miracle-worker from a backwater town called Nazareth, is the messiah God promised to send to the world.

Imagine that you are part of this tiny sectarian movement within Judaism, with cells of fellow believers scattered hither and yon on the eastern edge of the Roman empire, and that you are being met with increasing hostility from Jews and increasing suspicion from Gentiles.

Before long, you become an isolated group of outlaws because you refuse to participate in the civic religion prescribed by Rome, and because you make the outrageous claim that Jesus rose from the dead after his crucifixion. You have no proof, only the stories about his empty tomb that began circulating soon after his death.

How many sensible people, Jew or Gentile, would believe such a claim? Even more improbable, how many people would risk their reputations, their fortunes, or their lives defending such a far-fetched notion? What possible future could any of those first Christians in places like Philippi and Ephesus and Thessalonica see for their little bands of eccentric believers? Could they, in their wildest dreams, have imagined you and me doing what we're doing this morning, with millions of other Christians, thanks to their willingness to defy the odds and believe against all the evidence?

If those first Christians had placed their confidence in their own abilities to bring their own good work to fulfillment, they would have been among the most foolish of people. But their confidence didn't come from their abilities; their confidence came from God. All those whose words have become part of our sacred scriptures placed their confidence not in human dreams and schemes, but rather in the power of a God whose love triumphs over everything, even death itself.

That's why God is the center of scripture. No matter how much scripture talks of individuals and peoples with names we can't pronounce and wars we've never heard of and miracles we struggle to find credible – all of that comes back to God.

God is not simply the center of scripture; God is the reason there's a scripture at all. And God is what distinguishes the Bible from both history and science. When you say the word "God," you've entered a place that neither history nor science can fully account for, and if we will open ourselves to the divine presence who is waiting for us in that place, we discover a confidence greater than all our doubts and fears.

Paul's confidence came from God. Jesus's confidence came from God. Moses's confidence came from God. Isaiah's confidence came from God. Elijah's confidence came from God. Every person so inspired by the Holy Spirit that she or he becomes an inspiration to others – that person's confidence always comes from God.

And that's what allows us, so many years and so many tears after our biblical

ancestors, to wait in Advent with patience, courage, peace, and hope. We wait because we are confident of the outcome. We don't know when, we don't how, but we do know who – and that who is God.

We believe that the God whose word brought creation into existence is the still-speaking God who calls us to lives of witness and service, and is the God whose word will be the last word when all our “sound and fury” is done.

That word of God, we believe with the evangelist John, became flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. That word of divine mercy and judgment, spoken from the cross and the empty tomb, has been speaking across the ages, and it will still be speaking at the end of time and beyond.

That word is love. Judgment, yes, because of our failures to live the life that has been given to us in the risen Jesus Christ, but judgment rendered by love itself.

My friends, if you believe anything about Advent, I hope you will believe that. Believe not in what happened long ago and far away, and believe not in scary predictions that may or may not come to pass, but believe rather in the power of God to make you and, through you, the world more than either of you ever dreamed possible. Believe that with confidence, and I can promise you a blessed Advent, a blessed Christmas, and a blessed life in this world and in any world to come. Thanks be to God.