

**McCabe United Methodist Church**  
**The Purpose of Christmas (Part 4)**  
**“A Time for Reconciliation”**  
**Isaiah 9:2-6; Luke 2:10-14**  
**12-23-12**  
**Pastor Ray Baker**

Ole and Lena had been married for forty years. They had never been happy with each other, but they agreed to stick it out. During one of the dark times in their marriage Lena said to Ole: “Ole, this thing is not working. We have been married for 40 years now. We’ve tried everything. We are always fighting. (PAUSE) Why don’t we pray to the good Lord to take one of us home...*and then...I can go and live with my sister.*”

Lena was interested in resolution, not reconciliation.

This is the final sermon in our series: The Purpose of Christmas. This past few weeks Pastor Rick and I have shared the Christmas Story, talked about Celebrating Immanuel: God with us; in good times and difficult times, and last week we remembered Christmas is a celebration of our salvation from sin.

Christmas is a time when we remember the Christ Child came to shine God’s light in our world and offer us Peace and grace. This is the gift that reconciles us to God and to each other: rich and poor, black and white, and believe it or not...Republican and Democrat. Today’s topic is reconciliation.

Today’s passage from Isaiah was written following a time of war and despair. The author is remembering the tragic time when the Northern Kingdom of Israel was conquered by the Assyrian’s and the Southern Kingdom of Judah had lost its prominence, because of a weak King. Our author reflects on these difficult memories while proclaiming the good news represented by the birth and reign of King Hezekiah. (Please note the language is all past tense.)

<sup>2</sup> The people who walked in darkness  
have seen a great light;  
those who lived in a land of deep darkness—  
on them light has shined.

Hundreds of years later, during the darkness of the Roman Empire’s occupation of Israel and the rule of King Herod, the people remembered the words of Isaiah. They remembered the promise God had fulfilled and they believed God would send the Messiah to save them as well. It’s within this context that Luke writes:

(Luke 2:10-11) But the angel said to them, *“Do not be afraid; for see—I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord.”*

This is also good news for you and for me. Many, many people have been able to overcome the darkness of their lives...to be reconciled to God and each other through their faith in the Christ Child. Reconciliation is part of the “mystery” of Christmas.

In her delightful book: The Best Christmas Pageant Ever; Barbara Robinson introduces the Herdmans...a family of incorrigible children who “lied and stole and smoked cigars (even the girls) and talked dirty and hit little kids and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker’s old broken-down tool house.”

It seems the Herdmans had never heard the Christmas story...and when they received the lead roles in the church’s Christmas pageant, some touching surprises occur. During the rehearsals, the Herdmans are incensed because Herod killed so many people...including his wife and two of his own sons...and then he died in BED of old age. So they wanted to rewrite the pageant...and write off King Herod for a new finish!

Sometimes, like the Herdmans, we long for speedy justice. We want to see the Herods of the world punished, to keep score with an eye for an eye. But Jesus brought us a better way...a way that applied to Herod, and to the soldiers, or any other group you wish to name. “Love your enemies...Pray for those who persecute you.”

In February 1992, Time magazine reported a story about a family that was able to overcome adversity and eventually reconcile with someone who persecuted them.

A man named Michael Weisser was the cantor in the synagogue in Lincoln, Nebraska. He was targeted for his faith and heritage by Larry Trapp, the local Grand Dragon of the KKK.

Mr. Trapp made chilling, late-night phone calls and bombarded Mr. Weisser with hate mail. Mr. Trapp did everything he could to harass, intimidate, and threaten Mr. Weisser with the intention of driving him out of town.

Mr. Weisser knew where this attack was coming from and he knew he had reason to be afraid. But he was able to respond with hope, not hate or fear.

Mr. Weisser decided to call Mr. Trapp back and got his answering machine. After listening to the message which was filled with anti-Semitic comments, he calmly offered to help Mr. Trapp. You see, Mr. Trapp was confined to a wheel chair. He needed help doing simple things; such as, getting out to the grocery store. Mr. Weisser kept at it for weeks, leaving recorded messages on the answering machine offering to

help his tormentor.

Finally, Mr. Trapp was fed up with the situation and he called him back, complaining, "What do you want? You're harassing me." After some time had passed Mr. Trapp eventually relented, he called Mr. Weisser and he confessed, "I want to get out of this and I don't know how." Mr. Weisser immediately said: "I'll bring dinner and we'll talk." Mrs. Weisser decided to help by bringing a silver ring as a peace offering. When they met face-to-face, the Klansman and the cantor, Larry Trapp burst into tears.

There was a follow-up report to this story on National Public Radio. They reported Mr. Trapp eventually moved in with the Weissers', who cared for him as his health declined.

The message of Advent is also the message of forgiveness. For Herod...for Mr. Trapp...and for us! This gift of forgiveness is the basis of our reconciliation to God and each other.

Have any of you gone to see the movie Lincoln? The movie is a powerful reminder of the difficulties our nation faced during the Civil War. It was a time of political and military conflict...a conflict which tore our nation and our families apart. We were divided...we were broken...our families were grieving the death of their brothers and fathers...and sometimes women and children. *It was the darkest time in the history of our young nation.* We were in need of God's gifts of salvation, forgiveness, and reconciliation.

When the Civil War ended in 1865, a group of citizens gathered outside the White House and waited for President Lincoln to come and say a few words. It was a time of great celebration. A band was there.

President Lincoln came out and addressed the crowd. He talked about the horrors of war. He talked about the importance of getting back together and healing the nation's many wounds. He talked about brothers reconciling with brothers, neighbors reconciling with neighbors, and states reconciling with states. AND then he said, "I want the band to play. I want them to play what I tell them to play."

Naturally, the crowd assumed President Lincoln would ask for: *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. It had become the theme song of the North during the war. But Mr. Lincoln went on to say something that shocked the crowd. He said, "I wonder if we, in winning the war, have the right to play that song. It might not be appropriate." As the crowd held their breath...he turned to the band and said: "I want you to play *Dixie*."

The band almost dropped their instruments. *Dixie* was the theme song for the south. For a minute, the band just stood there. They looked at each other with faces that said:

“Is he kidding?” They hadn’t played that song for years. THEN, after a long pause, the band started playing *Dixie*, quickly followed by Yankee Doodle Dandy.

In that gesture our nation was able to begin the long process toward forgiveness and healing. WHEN we forgive we can play the music we never thought we could play again. When we forgive we can sing songs we never thought we could sing again, because forgiveness is the first step toward reconciliation.

There is a tale of a sheep farmer who had a big problem. He was feuding with his neighbor, because the neighbor's dogs were killing his sheep and his children considered some of the sheep their pets.

It got so bad, he had to do something. So he examined his options. First, he could have brought a lawsuit and taken his neighbor to court. Second, he could have built stronger fences so the dogs couldn't get in. But he had a better idea. He gave some lambs to his neighbor's children. When these lambs began to multiply and their little flocks began to grow, the neighbor tied up the dogs and his problems were over.

Their relationship was reconciled through the recognition of their mutual interests.

Years ago I heard a quote that has stayed with me. “We will never have peace until we learn to love our neighbor’s children as much as we love our own. This is true for families, communities, politicians and countries. Christ calls us to make a difference in the world and it will only happen when we love the children.

It doesn’t matter if our neighbor’s children are across the street, across the country, or across the ocean.

The baby Jesus was born to be *a light* to a world of darkness. This light *guides us to replace* broken relationships, heal past offences, and overcome violence... *with grace, forgiveness, and reconciliation*. We are called to *walk in the light* and *offer Christ’s light to everyone*.

On this fourth Sunday in Advent we await the birth of the Christ Child, knowing he is “*the light of the world*” and darkness will never overcome *the light*. Amen.