

Faith Mennonite Church
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Learning to live out of control: awaiting the unexpected gift of God

Well, it's the 14th of December and Christmas is just around the corner. Around this time of year we often hear talk of needing to "prepare for Christmas." Whether this involves getting our last minute shopping done, putting a Christmas tree up and decorating it, or planning and preparing for family gatherings, most of us have certain yearly routines. Moreover, we have learned to come to expect certain things to happen during this part of the year. We all have our family traditions that are important to us—traditions that are crucial to our "Christmas experience." One thing is certain, Christmas-time is a thoroughly *planned out* affair. And indeed, if everything doesn't go just right, just as it has always gone before, then many of us end up feeling a deep sense of sadness.

When you're a child, you may be sad about that *one* gift that you were really hoping for but didn't receive. When you're a parent, you may feel bad that you can't afford to give your kids all the gifts that they wanted. Or, for those with kids who are grown up and are out of the house, these next couple weeks might be a very important time of the year, a time when we prepare for great big family gatherings and reunions with loved ones. When this doesn't happen, when people aren't able to make it, when plans don't go as expected, we end up feeling disappointed.

In our church calendar we are celebrating the third Sunday of *Advent*, which is also a time for *preparing* and *planning*—a time of waiting, anticipation, a time of expectation. But this should surely strike us as a *strange* time of year. All of this *planning* and *preparing* should strike us as a bit odd precisely because the *event* we celebrate on Christmas—the birth of Jesus, the *incarnation*, that is God becoming human—is not something we can ever finally *prepare* for—it is not something we can ever *plan* for or *engineer*. In short, this is because the birth of Jesus is a radically *unexpected gift*. That is to say, God's gift of grace, which comes to us in the person of Jesus *unsettles* our daily lives and *interrupts* history itself—and precisely because this grace exists as *gift* it is utterly *out of our control*. What I want to suggest to you today is that to confess that Jesus of Nazareth is master and Lord of history, as we as Christians do, is to begin to participate in a way of life that *renounces* all mastery. It is to embark on the difficult journey of learning how to give up the temptation to be in control. To confess that Jesus is Lord of history is to give up on our efforts to secure the outcome of our own lives and to control the lives of others. I want to suggest that this confession, that Jesus is Lord of history, lies at the heart of our church's commitment to Christian nonviolence, for it finally marks the *refusal* to pick up arms in order to control the outcome of history.

God's *unexpected gift* of grace is nothing less than the giving of God's whole self for us. The *incarnation* is an event located *firmly* within our human history. Yet, this gift comes to us from *beyond*. God's gift to us, the gift that we celebrate at Christmas, is not finally our *escape* from the relativities of human history; salvation does not mean freedom *from* the world and its many problems—but rather it means a radical freedom to exist more fully *for the sake of* the world. In the gospel of Luke, Jesus quotes the Old Testament passage that we read this morning--"The

Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor." Jesus claims that *this*, the hope of the poor for justice, the yearning of the blind for sight, the cry of the prisoner for *release*—*this* has now been fulfilled in his very person and his life story. At the heart of Jesus' mission, then, lies this very *unexpected* good news—namely, a proclamation of the concrete *liberation* of the poor, the oppressed, and the prisoner.

When we talk about these matters in church, perhaps especially during the Christmas season, we must avoid the tendency to *spiritualize*—for this is revealed to be just another strategy to act as if we privately *possess* this gift, it is a way to think of Christ as a piece of property, something that we can keep under our control and therefore to leave us fundamentally unchallenged. However, the gospel of Jesus Christ is not a particularly *settling* message. In fact, it is *profoundly* unstable and risky and it calls us out—not least because of its public, concrete, and political character. I think it is important for us to remember that our commitment to peace and nonviolence is not something that simply sections us off from the violence and conflict that pervades our world. The peace of Christ is not simply a harmonious sort of cessation of violence. Indeed, if we faithfully seek to embody the peace of Christ, we can expect to encounter *more* rather than less conflict, as Jesus' own history shows us and as the history of the nonviolent martyrs attests. Peace, then, in this perspective is a *positive* reality—not simply the absence of violence. This is because peace, that is, the peace of Christ, is a *more* determinative reality than violence.

As the gospel message we read this morning reminds us, Jesus is *much more than* a wise teacher or a prophet—he is *that* to which the prophets point—"make straight the way of the Lord"—he is the *light* to which John the Baptist witnesses. In his very person lies the fulfillment of all the hidden hopes and dreams of Israel, indeed all the hidden hopes and dreams of the world. We confess that Jesus is the "truth" of history. We, the church, as the body of Christ exist, then, like John the Baptist, to witness to God's *liberation and reconciliation* of the world that has already taken place in the person and work of Jesus Christ. We proclaim that Jesus, in all of his singularity and historical particularity is the concrete *light and hope of the world*. To confess that Jesus is the *light* is to say that while we, as the church, testify and witness to the light, with John the Baptist, we are decidedly not the light. In other words, it is a part of learning to renounce mastery—to allow Christ to be the Lord of history—it is part of learning how to live out of control. To confess that Jesus is Lord of history is to admit that all of our efforts to secure our own destiny, our strategies to avoid death, to maintain power and control over our own lives and the lives of others, finally end in failure. In short, it is to admit that we always stand in need of the radical transformative and restoring power of the Holy Spirit. So, in this time of *Advent* let us expectantly *await* the arrival of the genuinely *unexpected*—the good news of the interruptive, and indeed, *disarming* gift of God in Jesus Christ.

"Make straight the way of the Lord." Amen.