

# SERMON FOR DECEMBER 29, 2013

The First Chinese Church of Christ in Hawai'i (UCC)

7:45 & 10:30 Worship Services

Scripture: Isaiah 63:7-9; **Matthew:13-23**

Message: *"Because of Christ—We Are Different!"*

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The Book of Isaiah														
Focus	Judgment is Coming				Glory Will Follow									
Divisions	Judgment on Judah	Judgment on Judah's Neighbors	Judgment on All the Earth	Historical Interlude	Deliverance of God's People	Deliverance for God's People								
	1	12	13	27	28	35	36	39	40	48	49	57	58	66
Topics	Visions	Burdens	Woes	Wars	Worship									
	Sermons of Condemnation			Parenthesis	Sermons of Comfort									
Place	Judah & Her Neighbors				Israel & the World									
Time	About 40 Years (722-681 B.C.)				Thousands of Years									
Author	The Prophet Isaiah													



## **Gathering in the Word**

On this first Sunday of Christmas—there are 12 Days of Christmas!—we hear the story of strife and grace in Isaiah and Matthew’s Gospel. We listen and pay attention to a warning message about how not all the world received the **King of Creation** with kindness and awe. We note that soon after Jesus’ birth, some in the sinful world were jealous with envy and tried to kill Jesus!

Our Bible lessons this morning shouts out the reorientation of Christmas. **Reorientation means *a fresh orientation; a changed set of attitudes and beliefs!***

Because of Christmas and the birth of the Messiah—the promised deliverer of the Jewish nation prophesied in the Hebrew Bible—we are different in our worshipping, our thinking and our living of these days!

## **Hearing the Word**

**First Reading: Isaiah 63:7-9 (The VOICE Bible)**

<sup>7</sup> So let me remind you of the Eternal’s enduring love, and why we should praise Him. Let me tell you again how the Eternal gives and gives and gives. All God’s wonders and goodness are done for Israel’s benefit according to His great mercy and compassion.

<sup>8</sup> **Eternal One:** Surely, these are my people, *and they will be true to me*. My children will not try to deceive me. And *indeed*, God became their Savior.

<sup>9</sup> And when they suffered, God suffered too; and the messenger of His presence acted to save them. Out of enduring love, compassion, *and concern*, God Himself rescued them. Through all those years long ago, God picked them up and carried them through.

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Interpreting the Bible always takes the context into account of trying to understand the whole! That's what we pastors try to do in order to put our sermons together as well as in our studies!

In verses 1-6, GOD gets angry with the other nations and GOD *squashed, crushed, smashed* them with his feet! So what's going on?

Our lection verses today are verses 7,8,9: God is being thanked and praised—***I will tell of the kindness of the Lord, the deeds for which GOD is to be praised, according to all the Lord has done for us—yes, the many good things GOD has done for the house of Israel, according to GOD's compassion and many kindnesses.***

The Prophet Isaiah reminds us of God's faithfulness!

- ✓ GOD is not far away or abstract!
- ✓ GOD is always right here with us all the time!
- ✓ GOD is intimate and moves through all our lives and churches—always has been and always will!
- ✓ We are saved by GOD's presence!

**2<sup>nd</sup> Reading: Matthew 2:13-23 (The VOICE Bible)**

<sup>13</sup> After the wise men left, a messenger of the Lord appeared to Joseph in a dream.

Messenger of the Lord (*to Joseph*): Get up, take the child and His mother, and head to Egypt. Stay there until I tell you *it is safe to leave*. For Herod *understands that Jesus threatens him and all he stands for*. He is planning to search for the child and kill Him. *But you will be safe in Egypt*.

<sup>14</sup> So Joseph got up in the middle of the night; he bundled up Mary and Jesus, and they left for Egypt.

<sup>16</sup> *After a few months had passed*, Herod realized he'd been tricked. The wise men *were not coming back*. Herod, *of course*, was furious. He simply ordered that all boys who lived in or near Bethlehem and were two years of age and younger be killed. *He knew the baby King was this age* because of what the wise men told him.

*Herod knows ordinary babies will die in this purge, but he doesn't care—Herod is not so much cold-blooded as pragmatic, willing to do*

*whatever is necessary to kill this new supposed King. And so all those other baby boys die. But, of course, Herod's plan ultimately fails. He doesn't know the baby Savior has been whisked to safety in Egypt.*

<sup>17</sup> This *sad event* had long been foretold by the prophet Jeremiah:

<sup>18</sup> A voice will be heard in Ramah, weeping *and wailing* and mourning *out loud all day and night*. The voice is Rachel's, weeping for her children, her children who have been killed; she weeps, and she will not be comforted.

<sup>15</sup> Joseph, Mary, and Jesus stayed *in Egypt* until Herod died. This fulfilled yet another prophecy. The prophet *Hosea* once wrote, "Out of Egypt I called My Son."

<sup>19</sup> And after Herod died, a messenger of the Lord appeared in a dream to Joseph in Egypt:

Messenger of the Lord: <sup>20</sup> *You may go home now*. Take the child and His mother and go back to the land of Israel, for the people who were trying to take the child's life are now dead.

<sup>21</sup> So Joseph got up and took Mary and Jesus and returned to the land of Israel. <sup>22</sup> Soon he learned that Archelaus, Herod's *oldest and notoriously brutal* son, was ruling Judea. *Archelaus might not be any friendlier than Herod had been*. Joseph was simply afraid. He had another dream, and in this dream, he was warned *away from Judea*; so Joseph *decided to settle up north* in a district called Galilee, <sup>23</sup> in a town called Nazareth. And this, too, fulfilled what the prophets have taught, "*The Savior will be a Nazarene.*"

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Some while after Jesus was born, Matthew (and only Matthew) reports that some quacky and silly astrologers from Bagdad somehow managed to get at least one thing right – something new and glorious was happening over in Judea. To these astrologers (*those who study of the positions and aspects of celestial bodies in the belief that they have an influence on the course of natural earthly occurrences and human affairs*) it looked to them that a new king had been born.

The Spirit of GOD led the Magi (the wise men from the East). The Magi also did the unspeakably dangerous thing by “tipping off” King Herod about the birth of this new king! Herod was an insane and dangerous dictator-king (who came to power around the year 37 B.C.). If ever there was a person whom you would *not* want to tell that a new king was in the neighborhood—you wouldn’t tell Herod!

### **Matthew tells us three things:**

1. Fleeing to Egypt: The angel tells Joseph to flee and run away to Egypt; so Jesus’ family is spared Herod’s wrath and fury! The Magi-wisemen arrive and are summoned to the brutal King Herod. Matthew cites the prophecy (Hosea 11:1) referring it to Jesus—that Jesus embodies the people of Israel. Jesus is the

recipient, the bearer, and the fulfillment of the promise GOD made to Israel! The route is through Egypt in order that Matthew can tell the story of Jesus as a retelling of the story of nation of Israel!

2. The "*Slaughter of the Innocents*" is Herod's systemic act of killing of all the 1-2 year-old children in and around Bethlehem! Matthew is the only Gospel writer to record these widespread murders!
3. Later, the angel tells Joseph that Herod is dead and the coast is clear; but after learning that Herod's son Archelaus is now the King—the family decides to head up to Nazareth. Jesus is to be called a Nazarene!

Matthew's Gospel prepares a prophetic and visionary path for Jesus to walk in his life! Matthew trusts in GOD's providence and divine intervention.

### **Doing the Word**

So what is the Word of God for us on this 1<sup>st</sup> Sunday after Christmas?

1. **ONE: LET US PAY ATTENTION AND LISTEN TO GOD'S WHISPERING IN OUR LIVES!**

- ✓ When GOD whispers to us we are often led to unexpected paths of personal growth—even through challenges!
- ✓ When GOD whispers to us—**synchronicities** (*things are happening at the same time around us*) emerge—guiding us toward new possibilities of adventure; luring and moving us toward safety in threatening situations around us!
- ✓ Such messages may come to us all the time—but are we sensitive to their wisdom for us—often times, not!

## **2. TWO: WE ARE TO WELCOME THE IMMIGRANTS AROUND IN OUR NEIGHBORHOODS AND CHURCH!**

Mary, Baby Jesus & Joseph flee to Egypt—warned through a dream that King Herod planned to kill the young Jesus. So all three become political refugees—dependent on the kindness of strangers.

So are we to welcome the strangers the refugees around us—including those in our own families and neighborhoods!

## **3. THREE: THE MOST VULNERABLE AROUND US MUST BE PROTECTED!**



The killing of the 1-2 year-old-children is horrific, sickening, and horrendous!

- ✓ Our U.S. Congress is cutting food stamps and unemployment funding—including funding Head Start programs!
- ✓ 13 states around the U.S. are raising the hourly minimum wage of \$7.45 to \$10 or so.<sup>i</sup>
- ✓ The role for a church like ours!

After Christmas life goes on. . .

### **Sent in the Word**

What do we do now that Christmas is over? Some of us may have a great life; some on the other hand find ourselves constantly wondering what it all means. We stand on the cusp (*where one situation or experience ends and another begins*) of a new year and maybe we are secretly longing for this year to be better than last.

It might be a personal cry from within our own hearts or it might be a cry that echoes our concerns for others whom we know nearby or who remain anonymous and are far away.

Maybe you are facing personal difficulties: you are looking for a job; you are not well; you are mourning the death of a loved one; you are down or you are depressed.

Whatever the days and year ahead may hold for all of us—we are reminded to take heart in the serious business of God’s love which reaches beyond the barrier of the divine divide and promises us peace.

**This is what we do now that Christmas is over—we accept the gift that God has given us and we live!**

**Story: The Little Raggedy Girl**

There was once a little raggedy girl who lived with her widowed mother in what could only be charitably called a shack, just outside of town. She had few clothes to wear and those that she had were worn and patched in many places. She was clean and tidy. Her mother saw to that. But, her schoolmates could not see past her ragged clothing and they enjoyed making fun of her.

The little raggedy girl bore the insults of the other children in silence. One little boy, in particular, liked to make fun of the coat she always wore. Like the rest of her clothes, the coat had seen much better days. It was an ugly green color with pulls and rawls all over it. Some places had dark stains that no amount of washing could ever remove. But the coat was warm and it was the only one she had, so the little raggedy girl wore it to school every day.

Christmas was only a few days away now, and it was the last

school day before the long vacation. On her way home that day, a wet snow was falling accompanied by a biting north wind. It was cold and miserable. She was happy about her old coat and the warmth it provided. Still she wanted to get home quickly to the warmth of her house.

Several blocks from the school she saw three boys standing on the sidewalk. They seemed to be arguing, but she couldn't make out the words -- just a lot of shouting. Then one of the boys suddenly snatched the coat off one the other boy's back. The boy tried to hold onto his coat, but the other one was stronger. As soon as the coat was free, he and his friend ran off with it, laughing. The boy started to run after them but, in his haste, slipped and fell in the slushy snow, landing heavily on the sidewalk. The raggedy girl ran up to the boy on the ground. She was startled to find it was the very same boy who had always taunted her about her coat at school.

"What happened?" she shouted.

The boy on the ground was crying, tears streaming down his face. "They took my coat," he wailed. "Now I'll freeze to death."

The little raggedy girl smiled. "I doubt that," she said, "but you're going to get mighty cold before you get home. You might catch a bad cold and that's no good around Christmas.

Then the boy felt a gentle, soft hand wiping the tears from his cheek. "Don't cry," she said. "Here. Wear my coat until you get home."

"But you'll freeze."

"No I won't," the little raggedy girl answered as she took off the coat. "Mama always makes me wear this old sweater under my

coat for extra protection. It's not much, but it's better than nothing. Now put on my coat and we'll walk over to your house. If we hurry, it won't be so bad."

Ten minutes later, the pair arrived at the boy's house and stepped onto the porch. "Can you come in with me?" he asked. "You look positively frigid. Mom always has some hot chocolate and cookies for me when I get home on days like this."

The little raggedy girl felt funny going into such a fine house, but before she knew it the little boy had taken her by the hand and was dragging her through the front door. Inside, the house looked just as nice as it had from the outside. Just as the boy was taking off the ragged coat to return to the girl, his mother met them in the vestibule. "Who is this?" she asked. "And just where is your coat, young man?"

The little boy then told his mother all that had happened. When he finished, she smiled at the little raggedy girl and said, "You are welcome here. Come into the kitchen. I have some hot chocolate and fresh Toll House cookies. Eat with Mike and warm up before you go home. We'll worry about getting his coat back later."

The little raggedy girl had never tasted anything so good as the cookies and cocoa in her life. Her mother was far too poor to buy such luxuries. Just before she finished, the mother walked into the kitchen with a huge box wrapped in shiny red ribbon. She placed the box in front of the little raggedy girl. "Go on and open it, honey," she said. "It's for you."

The little raggedy girl opened the box. Her heart leaped into her throat. There, folded neatly inside, was a brand new coat. She looked up at the boy's mother. "Go on," the mother urged. "It's yours. Try it on. See if it fits."

The little raggedy girl took the coat from the box and held it out in front of her. It was beautiful -- bright red with a warm liner and a thick, soft fur hood. And there wasn't a spot on it. She had never seen anything so beautiful in all her life. She looked up at the boy's mother. She was smiling broadly. "I had bought that coat for my niece for Christmas, but I think you deserve it much more," she said.

Then the mother drove the little raggedy girl to her own front door. She thanked the woman, then ran into the house to show her Mama the new coat. After she had finished telling her story, she saw that her mother was crying. She put a small arm around her mother's thin shoulders.

"I thought you would be happy, Mama," she said softly. "But if you want, I'll take the coat back. See? I still have my old one."

The mother gathered her little daughter on her lap and hugged her. "I'm not unhappy, honey," she sniffed. "I'm overcome with joy. I knew that I would never be able to buy you a new coat for Christmas. Even used coats down at the mission cost too much for me. So I prayed to God that he would provide you with a new coat. And He did -- and a finer coat than I ever imagined."

The mother kissed her daughter on the cheek. The little girl could feel the warm wetness of her mother's tears against her dry, cool skin. "You know," the little ragged girl said as she hugged her mother, "I really am so very rich to have a mother like you."

**"And we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose."**

(Romans 8:28 NIV)

## **May God bless us all in the year ahead!**

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<sup>i</sup> Here are the state and local increases that will go into effect next week, as compiled by the Employment Policies Institute:

- Arizona: \$7.80 to \$7.90
- Colorado: \$7.78 to \$8.00
- Connecticut: \$8.25 to \$8.70
- Florida: \$7.79 to \$7.93
- Missouri: \$7.35 to \$7.50
- Montana: \$7.80 to \$7.90
- New Jersey: \$7.25 to \$8.25
- New York: \$7.25 to \$8.00
- Ohio: \$7.85 to \$7.95
- Oregon: \$8.95 to \$9.10
- Rhode Island: \$7.75 to \$8.00
- Vermont: \$8.60 to \$8.73
- Washington State: \$9.19 to \$9.32
- Albuquerque, N.M.: \$8.50 to \$8.60
- Bernalillo County, N.M.: \$8.00 to \$8.50
- San Francisco, Calif.: \$10.55 to \$10.74
- San Jose, Calif.: \$10.00 to \$10.15
- SeaTac, Wash.: \$9.19 to \$15.00