

'The Invisible Kingdom" A sermon based on Jeremiah 23:1-6; Colossians 1:11-20; and Luke 23:33-43 delivered on Sunday, November 23, 2025 by the Rev. Alison Andrea Young at the First Congregational UCC of Onekama, Michigan.

When I was a little girl at Mission Road Elementary School in Oceanside, California, I have a vivid memory of solemnly standing each morning, facing the flag, placing my right hand reverently over my heart, and reciting the "Pledge of Allegiance." Perhaps you share these kinds of memories. I remember reciting "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation, under God, *invisible*, with liberty and justice for all." "One nation, under God, *invisible*"... I dutifully repeated this mistaken word morning after morning throughout my elementary school years and it wasn't until Junior High School, when I saw the pledge written down, that I realized my mistake. The word is, of course, not *invisible*, but *indivisible*. Indivisible means incapable of being divided and was meant to point to the solidarity of our nation.

But, when I was still unaware of my mistake, I used to marvel at how neat it was that there was such a rich double meaning contained in this word in the "Pledge of Allegiance." God was, of course, invisible, as the words of the hymn "Immortal, Invisible, God Only Wise," reminds us, a hymn which was sung often in church during those formative years of my life. It was also clear to me that the nation could be thought of as being invisible, for where is there an identifiable entity that one can point to and say—"there, that is a nation?"

A nation is a concept made up of various individuals, states, governmental agencies, scenery, politics and ideologies, among other things. Therefore, it is certainly not visible in the true sense of the word. Further, I would argue that the actual word in the Pledge, *indivisible*, cannot be supported by history. For, our country is certainly plagued by a lack of solidarity based on the very nature of a

divisive political system—witness our most recent national political mess—not to mention a devastating Civil War fought 160 years ago. A concept like "nation" is not a tangible one, it is not something that we can see with our eyes, touch with our hands and feel its texture. It is therefore 'invisible' in some sense. Like the concept of the "Kingdom of Heaven" or the "Kingdom of God," a place to which the thief on the cross refers when he asks Jesus to remember him in our Luke passage this morning (Luke 23:42c), or the place to which Jeremiah's prophecy points when he speaks of a place where a righteous branch of David will "reign as king and deal wisely, . . . execute justice, and righteousness. . . . (Jeremiah 23:5). A "nation" is an intangible thing.

The idea of the "Kingdom of God" is also intangible and, as such, is also invisible. There is no way to point to something concrete, outside the metaphorical world of prophecy and parables, and say that—that right there, that place with the fancy castles and powerful kings is the "Kingdom of God"—right there on that divine map—SEE IT?!

All of this notwithstanding, however, the word invisible does not connote something that is inconsequential and non-existent. For, in order for something to be thought of as invisible, there must be something behind it that could be visible, that could be seen, if only one had the right kind of vision. My late husband sold life insurance, and the reason that such a business is so difficult, is that what Joe was trying to sell is intangible—invisible. It is much easier to sell something tangible, something that the customer can point to and say, "see what I just bought?" Clothes, jewelry, real estate, artworks, cars, and even cemetery plots, are tangible and thus much easier to see than something intangible like life insurance. Premiums are paid, but there seems to be "nothing to show for it." Risk

management, like the concepts of "nation" and "Kingdom of God," are just too hard to see. They are not ultimately visible concepts.

The Apostle Paul in his letter to the Colossians helps us with this concept as it relates to this idea of what I have dubbed an "invisible kingdom." In our epistle lesson this morning Paul explains that God has rescued us from the power of darkness by transferring us "into the kingdom of his beloved Son." (Colossians 1:13) And the way that God accomplishes this, Paul goes on to say, is due to the fact that the human Jesus, through the mystery of the incarnation, is "the image of the invisible God, . . . for in him all things in heaven and on earth were created, things visible and invisible." It is through Jesus, then, that we can "see" and "feel" the invisible, intangible God.

Like the air that we breathe and the force of gravity that keeps us from falling off the earth and spinning out into space, God is "invisible" except through those things that we, as Christians, know are the signs of Christ's Kingdom in our world. Like the visibility of our hearts beating through the invisible breathed air which gives us our lifeblood, and the fact that our feet are visibly planted firmly on the ground through invisible gravity, the "invisible kingdom" becomes visible when we see the results of God's love for us in the world around us.

When we see justice and righteousness happening, as Jeremiah reminds us, there the kingdom is visible. When we see homeless people sheltered and hungry people fed, there God's kingdom is visible. When we see the wounded healed, and the captives released, there the "Kingdom of Heaven" is visible. In the smile of an infant and the touch of a child's hand, we can see and feel the kingdom of God.

Finally, it is interesting to note the history of the "Pledge of Allegiance." It was written by a Baptist minister in 1892, partially as a way to remind us of the spirit of the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence, and to seek to heal

the wounds of the Civil War. Also of note is that the phrase "under God" was not added to the pledge until 1954 after a vigorous campaign by the Knights of Columbus. The pledge then, in some ways is a metaphor for what we have been talking about. Conceived as a way to call citizen's attention to "the republic for which" the flag "stands," it is a visible (once one sees it written out!) sign of several invisible concepts. The concepts of "republic," and "indivisibility" and even the belatedly added, "under God," are only visible and only tangible if people act on them.

Likewise, many things that affect people's behavior are invisible. Thank goodness psychologists have, within the last 20 years, begun to understand the invisible effects of trauma on an individual's behavior as a way to help with healing. Trauma's effects are mostly invisible and not easily understood, except as they affect behavior. My oldest adopted son was almost starved to death before he was removed from his home by the social workers. As a result, he has always had issues with food security. Innocent onlookers were baffled by his need to purchase his own food when we went grocery shopping and by his need to have his own untouchable shelf in the cupboard and in the refrigerator, but these small adjustments provided huge comfort for him.

One of the reasons that all of us should be very cautious of judging another's behavior is because of this. None of us know enough about a person's life and background to know what has effected their way of being in the world. The old Native American wisdom about "walking in another's moccasins" comes to mind here.

As we begin our Advent journey next Sunday, it is good for us to remember that it is through the Christ event, LOVE writ large coming down to earth in the form of innocent baby, that we are given a full "image of the invisible" God, as

Paul so strongly reminds us in his letter to the Colossians this morning. How much better our world would be if we could all remember this “invisible” truth and challenge ourselves in our daily lives to make it to become truly “visible”! Amen.

¹Baer, John W. *The Pledge of Allegiance: A Short History*. 1992.

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