

"Prayer Changes Things"

Luke 1:57-80

An Advent Sermon by Dr. Jim Davis

Given at First Presbyterian Church of Kingwood

December 12, 2010

I made a mistake. And I might as well admit it. I left a word out of the title of the sermon. I got in a hurry. I didn't have much time Monday. I had a lot to do. So I typed too fast, hit the send button and just kept going.

I didn't even notice until a couple of days later. Then I wondered what to do. I finally decided I wasn't going to do anything. Because the truth is the mistake makes the point beautifully. "Haste makes waste."

It does, doesn't it? But that doesn't stop us. Last Wednesday I walked into my weekly meeting with the staff here at First. And I don't know whether you know this or not, but we have a habit as a staff, a spiritual habit. We always start our meetings with a reading and a prayer.

A different staff person chooses the reading each week. But they have the choice. They can choose what they want to read. And last week, Matt Davis chose the reading. I want to share with you the words he read to us. So here they are, adapted from a story broadcast last week on National Public Radio.

"You're in a hurry. I know. You want to know what this story's going to be about. Stat. OK, OK. It's about impatience. For over the past few decades America's become an Impatient Nation.

We speed date. Eat fast food. Use self-checkout. Try the 'one weekend' diet. Pay for overnight shipping. Honk when the light turns green. Thrive or dive on quarterly earning reports. Speak in half sentences. Start things but don't ...

We text. We twitter in 140 characters or less. We complain about tweets that come back to us that are too long. We've even become impatient with ... wait for it ... wait for it ... impatience! 'I've had it with impatient people.' writes Christine Egan. 'I've run out of patience with them.'

Some people blame our increasing impatience on technology. But technology only does what we want it to do. And we want it to do what it needs to do faster. Don't believe me? Here's a quick mental experiment. Name one

technological task you wish your computer would do slower ... See!

People give other reasons for our impatient culture. It's a result, they say, of competition, or consumerism, or the constant fast pace of our lives. But the truth is impatience isn't really about acceleration. It's about agitation, edginess impetuosity."

And Matt kept on reading. But the truth is, I wasn't listening, because my thoughts were racing ahead. You see, I had a problem. What Matt was reading was the message I was going to be preaching! He was preaching my sermon! And doing it four days early! And I sat there thinking to myself. Well that's just God, isn't it? Sometimes He's too fast for us. And sometimes He's too slow.

I think Zechariah must have felt the same way. Remember his story? We started it two weeks ago? Zechariah was a priest and he was in the temple, praying prayers for himself and his nation when all of a sudden an angel appeared. The angel announced that Elizabeth, who'd been barren her whole life was going to give birth to a son.

And the truth is, it was too much too fast. Zechariah couldn't believe it. "How can this be?" he said. And some people believe that at that point Gabriel got angry with Zechariah and made him mute as a punishment for his unbelief. But I doubt it.

I think the real reason Gabriel made Zechariah unable to speak wasn't anger. It was compassion. You see by taking away his voice, Gabriel slowed things down for Zechariah. He gave him the gift of a nine month "time-out." And every parent in this room can understand why. Why do you give a "time-out?" To give the person who receives an to think over what they've said and done. To give them time to try and understand how to make a better response. And I believe Gabriel gave Zechariah exactly that.

But as anyone who's received a "time-out" can tell you. It can be a good thing or a bad thing. It can be beneficial or it can be simply "time served." So how did Zechariah use his "time-out?" Nobody knows for sure. But the truth is his options were limited. You see when you're getting a "time-out" you can use it in one of two ways. You can use it negatively to nurture your anger or your self-pity.

Or you can use it positively to think about making a new beginning when your "time-out" ends.

And from the song of Zechariah, it's pretty obvious. He chose to use his "time-out" positively not negatively. He chose to use it like it was intended. He chose

to use it as a time to think. And one of the things he thought through apparently was the message that Gabriel had given him. "Don't be afraid Zechariah," Gabriel said, "your prayer's been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you'll call him John."

Every time Zechariah thought about those words, he must have asked himself the question, "Why?" Why John? Why that name? You see it's not a name that you'll find in the Old Testament. It's a new name, derived from a combination of Hebrew words. In Hebrew, the words put together mean "God's gracious. He takes the initiative to reach out and draw His people to Himself."

Now the Old Testament has many passages that make that point. And the evidence shows that Zechariah knew those passages. Over and over again his prayer song alludes to those passages. It sings them out so everyone can hear the thoughts that have been running through Zechariah's head during his "time-out." Listen to them again.

"And you, my child, will be called a prophet of the Most High, for you will go on before the Lord to prepare the way for Him; to give His people the knowledge of salvation through the forgiveness of their sins, because of the tender mercy of our God ..."

The words show that Zechariah thought about more than just the name that Gabriel said he should give his son. He also thought about the work Gabriel said that John would do. He said he would "make ready a people prepared for the Lord." And during his "time-out" Zechariah must have wondered. What did that mean?

He hadn't thought much about it when the angel first spoke to him. His mind had been preoccupied by the news that he was going to have a son. But with months to think about it, it's remarkable. When Zechariah's "time-out" is finished, his priorities have shifted. You can see it in the order of his song. For the song doesn't start with words about John. It starts out with words about Jesus.

"Praise the Lord, the God of Israel, because He's come to His people and redeemed them. He's raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David ... to show mercy to our ancestors and to remember his holy covenant, the oath he swore to our father Abraham, to rescue us from the hand of our enemies ..."

Those are the first words Zechariah's spoke. That's what the Gospel says. And the words show what he'd been thinking about for the past nine months. The

real message Gabriel had brought to him wasn't about the birth of his son John. The real message was about the birth of the Messiah. After nine months of "time-out" Zechariah finally got it.

And we can get it too. Because you see Advent is supposed to be our "time-out." It's supposed to be our time to think through again how Jesus fulfills all the promises and prophecies of the Old Testament. We can get it too. But only if we learn how to give up our impatience for Christmas to come and take time to let Advent do its work in us. You see, Christmas can be richer if we don't rush it. It can be fuller if we find time to let Gabriel's words stay on our minds like Zechariah did.

But during his "time-out before the first Christmas Zechariah also did one thing more. He prayed. In the beginning he probably for himself. He probably prayed like most of us would. He prayed out his anger, his frustration, his sense that it wasn't fair for his voice to be taken away from him. But eventually his anger must have turned into an appeal. And it may have sounded something like this.

"I get it now God. I understand what you're trying to tell me. So can't you change things God? Can't you open my mouth and let me speak sooner Lord? Do I have to keep waiting?"

I think Zechariah probably prayed a few prayers like that. And the reason I think he probably prayed that prayer is because we all pray prayers like that. When the circumstances of our lives force us into the "time-out" chair, we ask God to change things, don't we? We ask Him to come and get us out of the chair. We wonder when he doesn't. After all prayer is supposed to change things, right?

But now, at last, it's time to give you the word that I left out of my title. The one I left out because I was in such a hurry. It was supposed to be the last word and the word was supposed to be "slowly." Because if Zechariah's story tells us anything dear friends, it tells us this. Sometimes prayer changes things slowly, and sometimes the first thing it has to change is us.

Let's pray ...