

Putting Together Christmas Sermon Series
1 – Reading the Instructions – Luke 1:5-25
Dec. 2, 2018
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Happy Advent, everyone! This truly is the most wonderful time of the year as we enter into this season of waiting and anticipation of the birth of the Christ child. If only there were time to truly slow down and enjoy this time of year, right? We know we're supposed to be focused on the reason for the season, that we need to put the Christ back in Christmas, but have you seen my shopping list? And I'm hosting Christmas dinner this year. And I'm running out of places to put the Elf on the Shelf. We don't have time to sit quietly and contemplate the magnitude of what's about to happen on Dec. 25. We simply have to take the pieces of Christmas as we experience them and figure out how to put them together into what we hope will be a meaningful season.

But that's hard, isn't it? It reminds me of a cartoon I saw recently. It featured a small tree with completely bare branches, a trash bag full of pine needles, and a tub of glue. The caption read, "When you get your Christmas tree from IKEA." For our Advent sermon series, we're looking at the different pieces of Christmas offered to us in the gospels and how we are called to put them together in a way that gives Christmas real meaning to us as followers of Christ. Today we'll talk about reading the instructions, next week we'll note that, for a meaningful Christmas, there is some assembly required, and then, after the choir's Christmas offering on the third week of Advent, we'll finish the season by learning how to enjoy the present.

When Sydney was three years old, for Christmas got her a tricycle, complete with a cute little pink bicycle helmet for safety. Those tricycle accidents can be nasty! The night before Christmas, I did what I did every Christmas Eve since becoming a minister: after leading an 11 p.m. Christmas Eve service, I rushed home, rolled up my sleeves, and prepared to put together the gifts that would be under the tree the next morning. Thankfully Santa usually didn't eat the cookies before I got there, so I had a snack to fuel my work.

I figured a tricycle would be pretty simple to put together, so I opened the box, pulled out all the contents, and set aside the instructions. "Don't you need those?" Leigh asked. "Who needs instructions?" I said. "It's a tricycle. How hard could it be?" And I was right! The wheels slid right on, the handlebars clicked into place, the seat fit firmly and...voila! Sydney's new tricycle was ready to go.

The next morning, Syd was overjoyed by her Christmas haul, especially the tricycle. She decided she wanted to ride it right away. So, we strapped on her cute little pink helmet, moved the tricycle into the kitchen, and let her give it a try. She sat on the seat, put her hands on the handlebars and her feet on the pedals, and began to push. As soon as she did, the handlebars came loose, the pedals slid off their pegs, and the front wheel dislodged and went rolling by itself into the dining room. Syd was left holding a set of handlebars that were connected to nothing. She looked at us and said, "It's a good thing I wore my helmet!"

Who needs instructions? Apparently, I did. And so did Zechariah. Even though he was a priest, one of the religious leaders of Israel, he almost missed his chance to experience the joy of Christmas because he didn't read the instructions. This is a wonderfully rich story and an important part of Christmas, but we often gloss over it on our rush to Bethlehem. It's curious that Luke's gospel, the story of Jesus Christ, doesn't begin with Jesus, but instead with a faithful priest and his wife, both of whom will disappear from the scene as soon as their son John is born.

We learn the couple is childless, which would have been a huge albatross around their necks, because people's worth was often defined by their ability to reproduce. A woman who couldn't bear a child was considered a disgrace, and a man with no offspring had no way of continuing his family's lineage. So, we can only imagine how fervently Zechariah and Elizabeth had been praying for a child. It was the present they wanted more than anything in the world.

But we also know that at this point in the story, Elizabeth is beyond her child-bearing years. You have to wonder if their prayers had dried up years ago and their feelings of anticipation had turned to disappointment. If a child hadn't happened yet, it probably wasn't going to happen. And add to that the fact that it had been about 400 years since the last prophet had spoken in Israel. Had God forgotten them? After a lifetime of waiting by Zechariah and Elizabeth, after 400 years of waiting by Israel, at what point do you simply stop waiting, stop expecting God to show up?

I fear that we are approaching Christmas the same way this year. After all, it's been over 2000 Christmases since the first one, so the promise of hope, joy, peace, and love that the Christ child brings has lost some of its luster. I mean, really, is the world more peaceful this year than last? Are you more hopeful? Are we filled with more joy? You could probably argue just the opposite. So, while we know we should be excited about the promise of Jesus being born again, I wonder if, like Zechariah and Elizabeth, we've grown a little calloused in our waiting, if we wear an armor of cynicism and disappointment when it comes to the birth of Jesus. Will God really show up?

That might explain Zechariah's reaction to what happens. While in the sanctuary to offer the incense, Zechariah is confronted by an angel who tells him that his prayers have been answered and his wife Elizabeth is going to have a baby. Now, Zechariah should know exactly what this means. If he's read the instructions, he knows that this is how God works. God does miraculous things like giving babies to barren women like Hannah, like Sarah, like other women in the First Testament. All things are possible with God. But in his disappointment, Zechariah has forgotten.

So instead of expressing thanks, he expresses skepticism. "How will I know this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years." Very diplomatic of Zechariah, don't you think? And yet, he has to know this is a major "Oops!" moment. We've all had those, haven't we? Those moments that, as soon as we say the words, we wish we could stuff them back in? Your spouse asks you if they look OK in their outfit and, instead of immediately answering with glowing praise, you hesitate for just a second. "Umm...sure!" Oops.

The angel immediately calls Zechariah on his faux-pas. Zechariah says, "I am an old man," and the angel responds, "I am Gabriel. I sit at the right hand of God. I think I know what I'm talking about. And because you doubted me, you will bear the punishment of not being able to speak." Imagine that, a religious leader not able to speak. A punishment for him, but a blessing for his congregation!

Or was it a punishment? Nine months of silence sounds like a long sentence for asking a reasonable question. But maybe what we see is a punishment is actually a blessing. Maybe his silence protected Zechariah from saying too much too soon, from the burden of trying to explain what's going to happen. Maybe his silence, in the midst of all the noise, is a gift. What was he able to hear when he could no longer speak?

Several years ago I was invited to join the board of one of our denomination's organizations that focuses on Christian unity. I was so excited for the first meeting! But the night before the meeting, my throat felt sore, and by the time the meeting started the next day, I had

completely lost my voice. I did my best to participate, rasping out answers and pantomiming ideas, but after the meeting, the director told me, “We’re really glad you were here, but no one understand a word you said.” For most of the meeting, I was unable to participate, so I had to sit and listen. And what I heard were other people’s ideas, their dreams, their vision for the organization. Normally, I wouldn’t have been paying attention because I would have been thinking about what I was going to say next. But because I had nothing to say, I stayed silent, and heard far more than I would have otherwise.

What would it mean for us to be silent, to stop talking long enough to listen for what God has to say to us this Christmas? Maybe the silence is how we preserve the mystery of this message, maybe it’s the white space of the Great Artist’s canvas, maybe it’s a restful Sabbath in a hectic week, maybe it’s the pregnant pause during a season that is supposed to be full of expectation, not angst. What if the silence allows us time and space to withdraw from the cynicism of the world long enough to hear the hope, peace, joy, and love that God is speaking to us once again?

One commentator said about Christians, “We often live from our shallows rather than from our depths.” Maybe we feel like we have to do that, because we have to cover so much ground in our lives there’s no time to go deeper. And the noise! There’s so much noise around us. But the angel Gabriel knew that Zechariah couldn’t learn anything with his mouth open. He needed to be silent in order to hear God’s instructions for him.

Don’t get me wrong, I like words. I use them all the time. Words are needed to win our votes, change our minds, open our wallets. This season is filled with words! But where is the silence? This world is not going to carve out that space for us. It’s up to us – to stop talking so much, to stop trying to explain or understand, to simply shut up before the mystery of God and see what instructions the silence has to offer us.

This season, I want to invite you to listen. Fix a cup of coffee or tea before your day gets started and read Luke 1. Go for a drive around your neighborhood and look at all the Christmas lights. Go to a Christmas music concert and listen to all the different sounds. Pick a time of day when you can sit still for ten minutes and just listen. There will always be something to say later. But for that moment, just be silent.

The angel says to Zechariah, “Just be quiet and let God work.” That’s hard for us, because we feel like so much during this season is on our shoulders, so many responsibilities and deadlines and expectations to meet. And, in our well-intentioned efforts to do all those things, we miss what God is doing in our midst, and then after Christmas we wonder if God has forgotten us again. Where’s the hope and peace and joy and love this year? We think God hasn’t delivered on God’s promises. But I wonder if God will deliver, if Christ will be born again in our world, and yet we won’t be still enough to witness it. “How will I know this is so?” Shh. Be quiet. Look and listen for where God is at work around you. And then, when the time comes, go and speak about what you have seen and heard. Those are your instructions.