

Put Your Feet Up

A sermon preached by
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Texts:

Luke 1: 8-25
Luke 1: 39-56

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Luke 1: 8-25

Once when [Zechariah] was serving as priest before God and his section was on duty,⁹ he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to enter the sanctuary of the Lord and offer incense.¹⁰ Now at the time of the incense offering, the whole assembly of the people was praying outside.¹¹ Then there appeared to him an angel of the Lord, standing at the right side of the altar of incense.¹² When Zechariah saw him, he was terrified; and fear overwhelmed him.¹³ But the angel said to him, “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you will name him John.¹⁴ You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth,¹⁵ for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He must never drink wine or strong drink; even before his birth he will be filled with the Holy Spirit.¹⁶ He will turn many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God.¹⁷ With the spirit and power of Elijah he will go before him, to turn the hearts of parents to their children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous, to make ready a people prepared for the Lord.”¹⁸ Zechariah said to the angel, “How will I know that this is so? For I am an old man, and my wife is getting on in years.”¹⁹ The angel replied, “I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to bring you this good news.²⁰ But now, because you did not believe my words, which will be fulfilled in their time, you will become mute, unable to speak, until the day these things occur.”²¹ Meanwhile the people were waiting for Zechariah, and wondered at his delay in the sanctuary.²² When he did come out, he could not speak to them, and they realized that he had seen a vision in the sanctuary. He kept motioning to them and remained unable to speak.²³ When his time of service was ended, he went to his home.²⁴ After those days his wife Elizabeth conceived, and for five months she remained in seclusion. She said,²⁵ “This is what the Lord has done for me when he looked favorably on me and took away the disgrace I have endured among my people.”

Luke 1:39-56

In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth.⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, “Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb.⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy.⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.”

⁴⁶And Mary said,

“My soul magnifies the Lord,

⁴⁷and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

⁴⁸for he has looked with favor

on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

⁴⁹for the Mighty One has done great things for me,

and holy is his name.

⁵⁰His mercy is for those who fear him

from generation to generation.

⁵¹He has shown strength with his arm;

he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

⁵²He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly;

⁵³he has filled the hungry with good things,

and sent the rich away empty.

⁵⁴He has helped his servant Israel,

in remembrance of his mercy,

⁵⁵according to the promise he made to our ancestors,

to Abraham and to his descendants forever.”

⁵⁶And Mary remained with her about three months and then returned to her home.



Two things to get us started . . .

One — the word *kathisma*. A few years ago, a work crew in Israel was installing a water pipe to supply their construction site at Har Homa, a controversial Israeli settlement outside Jerusalem. The pipe work was about a mile from the actual settlement and as they were digging they unearthed the remains of a Byzantine-era Christian church. Like most archeological discoveries, this one detoured the construction project as historians figured out what had been uncovered. It was a site between Jerusalem and Bethlehem that had been visited by pilgrims for hundreds of years because it was believed to be a place where Mary sat down to rest on her way to Bethlehem. The church was known as the *Kathisma*, a Greek for *The Seat*. In the middle of the church is a large, limestone rock that pilgrims venerated as a resting place for a weary Mary. *Kathisma* — The Seat.

So there you are. That's what *kathisma* means. The Seat.

The second thing I have to tell you right up front is this — I have never been pregnant. I have no idea what it's like carrying around another human being inside my body; I have no idea what it's like gaining an extra pound or so (well, maybe I do know that part); I have no idea what it means emotionally or physically or hormonally or bonding-wise or otherwise. I just have no idea. I've been through it three times but I would never stand up here and tell you I know what it feels like — just in case you thought I might.

I just needed to get that off my chest before you should decide to rush the pulpit calling me a . . . whatever it is you would call me if I even in the least hinted that I know anything about how it feels.

But, with your permission, I do want to take a little guess at something. Now tell me if I'm wrong, but I would suspect that in the 9th month, it would not be very comfortable taking a trip from Nazareth to Jerusalem to Bethlehem. In an air conditioned car,

today, I would guess it's not a great experience. Walking — or maybe riding a donkey — more than 70 miles 2,000 years ago, probably was no blast. And I suspect that a big, limestone rock in the middle of the desert is probably not the most comfortable place to prop one's weary, pregnant body. My guess is that Joseph was taking some real heat for this decision to head to Bethlehem anyway and this big old rock-hard seat didn't help very much. But remember — you guys all know this — Joseph had no idea what it feels like to be pregnant either.

But legend says that's where she took a rest — a big, old limestone slab out there under the stars. It was there that she took a few moments to put her feet up. Which is — I risk making another pregnancy assumption here — probably what I would do even if it is on a cold, flat rock out there in nowhere-land — put my feet up. Is that a good assumption? Nine months pregnant, walking along the highways and byways of Israel, find the closest *kathisma* and put your feet up.

Okay — there's my two up-front statements. One, *kathisma* means the seat. Two, I know nothing about being pregnant but probably putting your feet up isn't such a bad thing.

Luke 1 tells us a bit about Zechariah's and Elizabeth's journey toward parenthood. Zechariah and the angel Gabriel have an exchange which took place before Mary had heard from her angelic visitor that she would have a baby. Zechariah was of a priestly family and served in the Temple in whatever capacity was necessary. I guess it was a pretty busy job — wait a minute, I may not know about pregnancy, but I do know about priesthood — so I don't have to guess this time. I'll just tell you — it *is* a pretty hectic profession now and again because you do whatever is required of you when you are a priest.

Zechariah represented God to his people. He spoke to God in the Temple, he sacrificed to God at the altar, he taught God's law, he was of the family that God had chosen during the Exodus to be

priests forever.

So often I have found myself doing one odd thing or another as I have served in my pastoral role over these 22 years. Many times I have said to people while helping fold and put away tables and chairs at some function that all seminarians are required to pass a course called “Chairmanship 101” which taught us how to do that sort of thing. You do whatever is required of you — and sometimes on Sunday mornings I find myself up and down steps and in and out of doors so many times that I’m dizzy by the end of the day. So it’s a hectic job sometimes — but it’s also a rewarding job.

And Zechariah was about to be rewarded. He had been picked by lottery to go to the altar and burn the incense this particular day. A pretty awesome responsibility. Pass through the veil, enter the Holy of Holies, stand there at the altar built by Solomon and make this special offering before the God of Abraham and Sarah, Isaac and Rebekah, Jacob and Rachael. I imagine that when his name was called out from the lottery he had to maintain his cool, yet even though it probably wasn’t his first time, when his back was turned and he was headed into that Holiest place in his world, he must have let loose with a “Yeeesss!”

Yet once beyond the veil performing this duty as priest, Zechariah encountered something very out of the ordinary. An angel spoke to him — told him he was going to be a father even though all these years he and Elizabeth hadn’t been able to conceive.

Now just imagine. Here he is doing all the things he’s supposed to do — in and out, up and down, lighting incense, saying the right prayers, reading the right scrolls, swinging the incense, saying the prayers, talking to God — everything that he’s been taught about his profession and WHAM!, an angel stopped him in his tracks.

The angel says . . .

Do not be afraid . . .

Your prayer has been heard . . .

Your wife will bear a son . . .

You will call him John . . .

He will be great in the sight of God . . .

He will not drink wine or strong drink . . .

He will have the spirit and power of Elijah . . .

He will make ready a people for their Lord . . .

WHAM! These are pretty powerful things Gabriel says to Zechariah. I know I’d be floored. What do you say to an angel who says this to you. Here you are mixing the incense, sayin’ the words, doin’ the prayers, burnin’ the stuff . . . doin’ what you’re supposed to be doin’ and the angel says . . .

What do you say back? “Hubbahdah, hubbahdah, hubbahdah . . .” Old Zechariah says, “How will I know this is so? For I am an old man and my wife is getting on in years.”

And for that response he gets zapped. No more speech until the baby is born. “Whaaa. . . t ?,” is his last word for a while. Out of the Temple he went trying to explain to the crowd what had happened, like most of us trying to communicate to people who are Deaf. Nothing comes out of his mouth. His signs made no sense. They think he’s had a vision but there’s no way to explain it.

Do you know what I think happened? I think Gabriel decided that old Zechariah was just rushing around a little too much, not paying attention to what God had in store for him, unable to pay attention to the joy and goodness of this great news, a little too busy for this memo from the Boss and he gave him a big old *kathisma* to sit down on for a while to cool his jets.

That’s right. A seat — a place, a space, a time for him to sit back and figure out his priorities. Gabriel let Zechariah have a few months to put his feet up and get ready — really ready, not just

going-through-the-motions ready, but really focused on what was happening in his life and what a blessing it was.

In an episode of the classic television sitcom, *Taxi*, there is a wonderful exchange between Alex (portrayed by Judd Hirsch), a wise, father-like character who always seems to have a calming effect on whatever situation arises and Jim Ignatowski (played by Christopher Lloyd), a self-proclaimed minister of the streets, Rev. Jim, who burned out a few too many brain cells in the 60's. Rev. Jim has decided it's time to get a real driver's license so he has studied the NYC drivers' manual and is taking the written part of the test at the Department of Motor Vehicles.

Alex has accompanied Jim to the testing place and stands off to the side while Jim agonizes over questions like name and age and eye color. When he gets to the actual driving questions, he struggles with the most basic of questions. He whispers across the room to his friend Alex, "Pssst!". Alex tries to ignore him but Jim insists, "Pssst!" until Alex gives in. "What?," Alex answers.

"What do you do at a yellow light," Rev. Jim asks. "Slow down," Alex replies. Jim asks again, of course a little slower this time, "What - do - you - do - at - a - yellow - light?" "SLOW DOWN," Alex whispers in loud voice. With total disgust and indignation, Rev. Jim slows it way down, "Whaaat . . . dooo . . . youuu . . . dooo . . . aaat . . . aaa . . . yelloooow . . . liiiiiight . . .?!"

You can imagine the situation . . . the confusion . . . the eternity of a question like that.

I remember that episode at particular times in my life. And I thought about it as I read of Zechariah's predicament. "Slow down," says Gabriel. "But, but, but, . . ." "Sloooowww doooowwnn." And then there's no choice. Sit down, put your feet up, and begin to get ready for the big event.

And so here we are again also. The 3rd Sunday of Advent. It's time for us to get ready for the big event. Thanksgiving's over, Santa's in town (I saw him myself at the mall just the other day), it's December 12th. You have just 13 days left to get the house cleaned . . . Christmas cards addressed, stamped and mailed . . . so many people to visit, friends to see, parties to drop in on . . . traditions to uphold, the lights at Wanamaker's, the *Nutcracker*, *A Christmas Carol*, *The Grinch Who Stole Christmas*, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* . . . a tree to buy and decorate, the ladder to the roof and a staple gun to those lights . . . packages to be bought, wrapped, some of them mailed . . .

The only person I saw not in a hurry was in a television news report on Friday after Thanksgiving – the guy that the mall pays to sit at the fountain and watch you and count your bags to gauge how successful black Friday has been. A guy to count your bags? Can you believe it? And he'd been doing it for 20 years! Everybody else was in a hurry — he calmly counted your bags and checked on your mood.

This is one of those times in the year when I hear those words so clearly, "slooww doowwnn." Maybe it wouldn't be so bad to be forced to be quiet for this preparation time, forced to focus on just what it means to get ready for Christmas, to get ready for that blessed event that's headed our way again. We probably move too fast anyway. Why do we speed up to get ready for a day that's supposed to be just a celebration of the beginning of something? I'm never quite sure. I ask myself every year why it is that I have to get everything all revved up for December 25. Maybe we should take it easy — pull up a *kathisma* — put our feet up.

Henri Nouwen spent most of his career in academic circles, for many years he taught at Yale Divinity School. In 1985, he changed his life's direction and moved to the L'Arche Daybreak Community in Canada. There he was chaplain and lived in community with people with and without disabilities. In 1986, Nouwen met Adam for whom he was to care. Adam had very little

ability according to the majority's standards. He couldn't speak or even move without assistance. His life was riddled with seizures and to the world he was a nobody. Yet Henri Nouwen had to care for him.

In his book *Adam: God's Beloved* which Nouwen wrote after Adam's death yet did not publish before his own sudden death just 8 months later on September 21, 1996, he tells about Adam, "my friend, my teacher, and my guide." He tells of the difficult time he had getting used to having to physically handle another adult human, how he struggled with his own inability to know what to do for this man. Helping Adam meant getting him up at 7:00 am, taking off his pajamas and into a bathrobe, walking him to the bathroom, shaving him, bathing him, choosing his clothes, dressing him, combing his hair, walking him to the kitchen, making him breakfast, sitting with him as he ate, supporting his glass as he drank, brushing his teeth, putting on his coat and hat and gloves, getting him into his wheelchair, and pushing him along the pot-holed street to his day program. Adam would return at 4:00 pm when Nouwen would perform the evening routine.

Nouwen wrote that he gradually got used to Adam's routine and found that he could be through it by 9:00 am and then have the rest of the day to himself. "I must confess," . . . Nouwen wrote, "that there were moments when I was impatient and preoccupied by what I was going to do when I had finished Adam's 'routine.' Then, without being conscious of his person, I started to rush him. Consciously, but mostly unconsciously, I hurriedly pushed his arms through his sleeves or his legs through his trousers. I wanted to be sure I was finished by 9:00 am so I could go to my other work. Right here I learned that Adam could communicate! He let me know that I wasn't being really present to him and was more concerned about my schedule than about his. A few times when I was so pushy he responded by having a grand mal seizure, and I realized that it was his way of saying, 'Slow down, Henri! Slow down.' . . . He was clearly asking me if I was willing to follow his rhythm and adapt my ways to his needs. I found myself beginning

to understand a new language, Adam's language."

I have a hunch that the new language that Nouwen was learning is the same language that Zechariah found in his temporary absence of language. I think not only was it Adam's language that Nouwen learned but it is God's language. It's a language that does not mesh well with our list of a thousand Christmas chores and 24 days to do them. It's a language that does not fit all that well with Zechariah's understanding of how old was too old to be parents. It's a language explained by what Gabriel said to Zechariah, "because you did not believe in these words, which will be fulfilled in their time" — THEIR TIME. Not Zechariah's time — God's time. Not Nouwen's time — Adam's time. God's time.

Advent is a time to hear that new language. Let it happen in God's time this year. It's a new rhythm, a new reality, a slowing down of our pace and frantic rush, it's a new language. A new language.

Want a new word to get you started? *Kathisma* — the seat — Mary found it, I suspect Elizabeth and Zechariah and Joseph and most everyone else in that beautiful old story that we're about to hear over the next few weeks found it also. So find a *kathisma* for yourself this year. Put your feet up and slow it down.

Amen.