



SERMON OF THE WEEK

First Presbyterian Church of Honolulu at Ko'olau

November 27, 2016 - James 12:1-7

The God of the Roundabout Way—Real Faith for Real People Series

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I have family living in Southern California. I grew up there. When I was a pastor in the San Francisco Bay Area and I wanted to visit my family, over 400 miles away, sometimes instead of flying, I'd drive from the Bay Area to southern California. And my favorite route was Interstate-5. I-5 runs straight down the middle of the state. It's not particularly scenic but it's fast. Taking I-5 to Los Angeles is all about getting to L.A. I don't know what's wrong with me but I'm not a huge fan of road trips. I'm all about getting to the destination.

If I was headed to the mountains to go skiing I usually took Interstate 80 and blasted my way through towns like Fairfield, Sacramento and Auburn. In 2.5, maybe three hours, I'd be in the mountains. Maybe I shouldn't say that. OK, maybe 3.5 hours later, I'd be in the mountains ready to ski my brains out. For me, it's all about getting to the place where the fun is going to happen. What's the shortest, fastest route between two points? That's the one I want to take. I like linearity. So, why isn't my life in general more linear?

One of the things I continue to discover about God is simply this. He does not seem to value the beauty of a straight line as much as I do. If I allowed God to drive me to L.A., I'm convinced He would take Highway 1. This is what that would look like. (Video Clip #1 with music) That's right. Boston is on God's Spotify playlist.

Our God is frequently the God of the scenic route. He prefers the coastal route to the straight-as-an-arrow interstate highway down the middle of California. Our God is sometimes the God of the roundabout way and the roundabout way is a route where there are LOTS of potential delays, TONS of opportunity to get out and stretch your legs, and where it's MUCH more difficult to estimate when you're actually going to reach the destination.

If God drove me to the Sierras I'm convinced, on most days, He'd take me up the mountain on back roads that took us through towns like Copperopolis and Markleeville. When it comes to our lives, it's my personal observation that God is not all that linear. He likes the indirect way. He prefers the scenic route sometimes—or so it seems.

He is the God of the roundabout way. Our God is the God who took the people of Israel to the Promised Land by way of the desert. That was not the direct route from Egypt, but it was the best way for the people to get there. God knew the people of Israel were not ready to face the challenges in the land He would give them, so He took them on the scenic route. Getting the people of Israel out of Egypt was challenging.

But as one commentator said, "Getting Egypt out of the people of Israel was going to take a lot longer."

God wants to get Egypt out of us. To accomplish that surgical task we have to first recognize the difference between the culture of the kingdom that Jesus is in charge of and the often-misguided values of the nations we live in, including our own. For the Israelites, it was going to require a trip through the wilderness to bring change like that. Our God is the God of the round-about way, which is often the best way.

Have you ever experienced one of these road trips with Jesus? I have. What James is discussing in his letter are some of the roundabout ways God uses to bring His Kingdom into our world. God is working in us to replace the cultural values and priorities that are at cross-purposes with the values of the Kingdom of God. Jesus wants to replace those values with the values and priorities of the Kingdom that He leads.

Once again, our brother James is quite blunt. James is a little like that relative you invite to Thanksgiving dinner who brings up the most awkward, emotionally charged topics as he passes the gravy. In verses 1-4 James calls into question whether it is really possible for one who claims to know and believe in Jesus Christ to show favoritism to the rich and dismiss the poor. He's basically saying, "Have you really understood the gospel of Jesus Christ? Do you really know the heart of God if you show favoritism to those with earthly power and dismiss the vulnerable and marginalized?"

That's a conversation stopper as your Tutu serves her homemade pumpkin pie. James is saying in verses 5-7, that if we are making those kind of distinctions, if we show preference for the wealthy and demonstrate prejudice towards the poor, we're living in a way that is contrary to how God has acted and is acting in our world. So, who invited James to Thanksgiving dinner? James says, "If we're going to show preference at all, we need to give the seat of honor to the powerless. You cannot on the one hand profess that you actually know and understand and believe the gospel of Jesus Christ if you dismiss the poor. It is completely incompatible with the gospel of Christ." So who invited James to Thanksgiving?

Back in James 1:9-11 James addresses those who are rich, which would include those in the Christian community who are wealthy. So, this passage is not a wholesale condemnation of material prosperity. A faithful follower of Jesus can also be one who has financial means, even significant resources at their disposal. The question facing the rich and powerful is what will they do with the resources they have been given to serve the cause of the Kingdom of God?

James is unmasking a deep problem many of us can relate to. Why would we show preference to the wealthy and powerful and disregard the poor? I think one of the reasons we would do that is because we have put our trust in wealth and worldly power...and not really in God.

That's why we sometimes want to align ourselves with those who have both wealth and power, seeing those who have neither of little value to us. I'm not saying that we consciously think that. It's often far subtler. We show preference to those who might be able to do something to benefit our lives and we can look away from the poor because, if we're honest, we fear that they might be a drain on our

own resources. Or could it be that we have simplistic, even dismissive explanations for why the poor are poor?

But it is precisely those who have neither wealth nor power who have the attention of Jesus Christ in a primary way. Jesus Christ, God the Son, entered our world without earthly power as the child of a poor family. He deliberately came into our world, identifying intimately with those who had little or no worldly wealth or power.

So, James is cautioning us to be careful. If we want to be a part of what God is doing in the world to bring in the Kingdom Jesus leads, we must be extremely careful if we carelessly align ourselves with the power structures of this world, that have so often ended up oppressing and exploiting others, especially the powerless as James points out in verses 6-7.

Giving a seat of honor to one who cannot repay us for our hospitality is one of God's roundabout ways of bringing His Kingdom to earth. It's one way God could be at work to bring about real change in a community, in an individual's life. God often uses very indirect, even roundabout ways, in our lives, in our families and in our world to bring His Kingdom into our world. He does things that are unexpected, even counter-intuitive to bring His transformation and change to our lives, to our churches, to our communities and to our world. He is the God of the roundabout way.

There is nothing more counter-intuitive and roundabout than the birth of Jesus Christ. That is one of the reasons I love this season of the year so much. Today, we're entering the season of Advent. Advent is a time where we prepare to celebrate the birth of Jesus Christ on Christmas Day. I want to think with you about the connection that exists

between what James is challenging us to do here in chapter 2 and the unexpected, counter-intuitive birth of God's Son.

Here's what I'm up to in this sermon. Sometimes I just want to tell you up front what my plan is. Here's what I want to help us see.

First, God's ways are not our ways. God's methods are often unexpected and even roundabout.

Second, God entered our world in weakness and vulnerability and aligned Himself, in Jesus, with the poor and marginalized.

Third, this is how God's Kingdom broke into our world and how his in-breaking Kingdom is coming into our world today.

Fourth, even though God's ways may not be our ways, God wants to transform the way we tend to do things so our ways will be more like His ways.

If this is who our God is and if this is how Jesus lived and is moving in our world today, then that is how we are called to live. If we can understand that, not just in our heads but in our hearts as well, I won't have any problem convincing you that James is exactly right about what he says in chapter 2, verses 1-7. What James challenges us to do is the way we're called to live if we want to be a part of bringing God's Kingdom into our world.

Maybe God has you on one of His road trips. I guarantee that you'll be on one of His scenic excursions if you want to be a part of how He is bringing hope and change to our world. God's way is rarely the fastest way. It is rarely the easiest way but it is the best way.

That's what a priest by the name of Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth discovered in Luke chapter 1.

As we begin the season of Advent, I want to talk with you about a story in the Gospel According to Luke that is foundational for the story of the birth of Jesus. It's a story of God, leading a couple, on one of His road trips.

Elizabeth and Zechariah had lived with the hope of having a child but at the beginning of Luke chapter 1 it looked like that was a dream that would never come true for them. They had not been able to get pregnant and they were both getting old. Elizabeth was past childbearing age. They had also lived with another hope that all the people of Israel had lived with for centuries. They longed for the day when God's 400 years of silence would come to an end and God would send his Messiah to throw off the yoke of Israel's oppressors and set them free to live once again as their own great nation.

Let's first take a look at the end of Zechariah and Elizabeth's story and then we'll back up and see how this all unfolded in a very roundabout way. This is a great story. If you're losing hope, if you're wondering what God is doing in your life, if you're disappointed with God, take heart. God just might have you on Highway 1. Luke 1:57-60 says,

57 Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. **58** And her neighbors and relatives heard that the Lord had shown great mercy to her, and they rejoiced with her. **59** And on the eighth day they came to circumcise the child. And they would have called him Zechariah after his father, **60** but his mother answered, "No; he shall be called John."

So much to everyone's surprise, Elizabeth and Zechariah got pregnant and she gave birth to a son that they named John. Why name him John? Because that was the name the angel of the Lord told his father Zechariah to give him. If you remember the

story, Zechariah, was a priest, who was chosen to burn incense and offer prayers in the Holy of Holies in the Temple in Jerusalem. That's something a priest could do only once in his life and because there were tens of thousands of priests in Israel the vast majority of them never got the opportunity to do this.

Nine months before baby John was born, Zechariah was in the Temple burning incense to symbolize the prayers being offered to God. As he prayed for the salvation of his people, as he prayed that God would send his Messiah, thousands of other priests were outside the Temple, on their knees, praying and waiting for Zechariah to come out. They used to tie a rope around the leg of the priest who went into the Holy of Holies so they could drag him out if he had a heart attack in there. That's how sacred and special that part of the Temple was. As Zechariah prayed in the holiest place in the Temple suddenly he looks up and there right in front of him was an angel. Let's rewind the story back to verse 11.

11 Then there appeared to (Zechariah) 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."

Can you imagine what that was like for Zechariah? This is not just the answer to the prayers of Zechariah and Elizabeth for a child. The fact they were finally going to have a child was, in and of itself, amazing. What is even more incredible for the people of Israel is the announcement that God has broken His silence and is going to fulfill his promise to send a Savior.

Now this is where Zechariah gets himself in a little trouble.

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."

That's a reasonable question. I get why he would ask that. He wants to be able to understand how his current reality is going to change. But here's a problem lots of us have. If we could, on occasion, just keep our mouths closed, things would go so much better for us. If we could just say something like, "Okay. Sounds good. Here I am, the servant of the Lord." If we could just say something like that, things would be a lot easier. Can you just imagine the look on this angel's face when Zechariah points out the obvious? "Really?! You're an old man and your wife is getting on in years. Wow! Thanks for telling me. I didn't know that."

Verse **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." ["Zechariah, you're speaking with an angel who has come from the presence of God himself with a personal message and that is not enough evidence for you?"] **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."

Outside the Temple the priest are waiting and waiting for Zechariah to come out. They're kneeling on the marble floor of the Temple, arms outstretched, praying and praying and waiting and waiting for Zechariah to come out of the Temple. Finally, he emerges and he can't speak. Zechariah tries to explain what's happened using only gestures. And suddenly, the people realize that after 400 years of silence, God has spoken and He has spoken to this senior priest nearing the end of his career. God's silence is over. But Zechariah's silence is just beginning. He is with God on God's roundabout way.

Zechariah will not be able to speak for the next nine months. He goes home and Elizabeth gets pregnant. Finally the day comes and Elizabeth gives birth to her son and on the eighth day they take John to be circumcised. When asked what the child's name will be, Elizabeth says, "His name is John."

Verse **61** *And they said to (Elizabeth), "None of your relatives is called by this name."* **62** *And they made signs to his father, inquiring what he wanted him to be called.* **63** *And (Zechariah) asked for a writing tablet and wrote, "His name is John." And they all wondered.*

God is a paradigm busting God. With the birth of John (this is the baby who will grow up to be John the Baptist), we're heading in a new direction and that direction is being defined by God's word to people and not by cultural conventions. In obedience to God, Elizabeth and Zechariah name their son, John.

Zechariah was not only mute, he was deaf as well since they had to motion to him. What was it like for this couple during these last nine months? How difficult was it to communicate with one another? What was it like for Zechariah to live in that place of silence? What was it like for him to not be able to talk? As we'll

see in a moment, when Zechariah's hearing and speech return, we'll see that the roundabout way has led him into a deeply intimate, life-giving conversation with God. His silence has drawn him into the mind and heart of God.

Verse **64** - *And immediately (Zechariah's) mouth was opened and his tongue loosed, and he spoke, blessing God.*

That is an example of the roundabout way of our God who often does the unexpected and asks us to do the same. John the Baptist would grow up to be come a man whose entire life was about pointing people, not to himself, but to Jesus.

So, let me help James make his point by doing the very same thing that John the Baptist does with his life. Let me point us, once again, to that manger. If you and I understand what is going on in the birth of Jesus, we won't have any problem understanding what brother James is telling us to do.

God entered our world in weakness and vulnerability and aligned Himself, in Jesus, with the poor and marginalized. That is how God's Kingdom broke into our world and how His in-breaking Kingdom is coming into our world today. If that is who our God is and if that is how Jesus lived and is moving in our world today, then let's do what James tells us to do.

How could you, this Christmas season, take what God has given you and use it to empower the powerless, to bless the poor, comfort those on the margins of our society or even in your own family? How might you bring peace to the fearful, and offer grace, encouragement and healing to those who are being swallowed up in grief and discouragement? You see, when we are the kinds of people James challenges us to be, we will show

that we are beginning to really understand and believe the good news of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

And if we choose to live like that, this Christmas could be one filled with the love that led our God to give His One and only Son for the world, that we, might truly live.

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