



New Day Church

Need a fresh start?

'Twas THE NIGHT

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New Day Church
Federal Way, WA
December 2nd, 2007*

Have you noticed that the Christmas season seems to be getting longer every year? In the retail world they call it “Christmas creep.” You now start seeing Christmas decorations going up in the stores as soon as the Halloween decorations come down. Some places start right after Labor Day.

Here at New Day, the Christmas season officially begins today. We kicked off Advent earlier, and this morning, I’m starting a new series of Christmas focused messages that I’m calling “’Twas the night: Thoughts on the ‘before’ of Christmas.”

Like most of you, I’ve heard the Christmas story countless times. I’ve read it more than I’ve read most other parts of the Bible. It’s about the most familiar section to me. So each year when it comes time to preach about it, I wonder, “What is there to say this time?” And you know what? Every year, God confirms for me just how awesome his word really is. Because there’s always more to find.

Do you know much about the California Gold Rush? The discovery first took place in 1842. Don Francisco Lopez was out chasing down stray cattle and he stopped to catch his breath under the shade of a tree. As he was resting there, he remembered what his wife had told him that morning: “Hey Cisco – necesito unas cebollas para cena.” “I need some onions for dinner.” So he took his knife and went and dug up an onion, and he noticed the roots were glittering. It was gold. Soon the countryside was swarming with people digging until it seemed the gold was gone.

Then in 1848, James Marshall was shutting down his saw mill one day when he looked in the stream that ran through it, and he saw gold shining on the bottom. Word got out again, and all kinds of miners made their way west to pan for gold in the rivers of California. And many of them quickly got extremely rich, there was so much to be found.

But you know what? James Marshall hadn’t even reached the mother lode. That was several miles away, waiting to be discovered at a later date. He was just getting gold that had eroded off the main lode and washed downstream.

I look at that history and I think – that’s God’s word. We think we’ve gotten all we can out of it, when really, we haven’t even reached the mother lode. There is always more waiting to be discovered. We can never mine it for all its worth.

Where I’d like to look for gold with you this year is in some of the circumstances leading up to Christ’s birth – the night BEFORE Christmas. By “night” I don’t mean the literal period of time before he was born. I’m talking about what you could call a “night of the soul”, a darkness that existed prior to Jesus’ birth. God chose the timing and setting carefully for when Jesus would appear, so I have to believe that he purposely allowed or created some dynamics that made the situation ripe for Christ to arrive: And my question is: What were those dynamics that were going on in the “before”?

I would describe the before as being the place where God brings people to prepare them for the new thing he’s about to do. As I relooked at the Christmas story from that angle, all these ways God used the “night before” began to stand out. And in this series, I’d like to consider together not only what made the world ready for Jesus to come, but also what can help make us ready for Jesus. That’s the deeper question. What can we take from what happened back at that first Christmas and apply to our lives here today?

I want to begin this morning by looking at what I guess you could call the night before the night before, because I want to take us back to the birth of John the Baptist, which was tied in so closely to Jesus’ own birth.

Luke 1:5-25

In the time of Herod king of Judea there was a priest named Zechariah, who belonged to the priestly division of Abijah; his wife Elizabeth was also a descendant of Aaron. Both of them were upright in the sight of God, observing all the Lord's commandments and regulations blamelessly. But they had no children, because Elizabeth was barren; and they were both well along in years.

Once when Zechariah's division was on duty and he was serving as priest before God, he was chosen by lot, according to the custom of the priesthood, to go into the temple of the Lord and burn incense. And when the time for the burning of incense came, all the assembled worshipers were praying outside.

Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to give him the name John. He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even from birth. Many of the people of Israel will he bring back to the Lord their God. And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

The angel answered, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their proper time."

Meanwhile, the people were waiting for Zechariah and wondering why he stayed so long in the temple. When he came out, he could not speak to them. They realized he had seen a vision in the temple, for he kept making signs to them but remained unable to speak.

When his time of service was completed, he returned home. After this his wife Elizabeth became pregnant and for five months remained in seclusion. "The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

Is anybody here headed to Costco after church? Besides having great prices on things like diapers and batteries, Costco has become famous for their free samples. The ladies that stand there in their hair nets and aprons are called "demo Dollies" and their job is to give you a taste of what you could get and make you want more. Pizza, meatballs, pie – you can get a whole meal just by walking around the store.

The story of John the Baptist's birth is like a free sample of the same God-work we're going to see in the birth of Jesus. It gives us a little taste of what's to come, and makes us want more. It creates anticipation that something big is about to happen. But it contains traces of the same grace we find in Jesus' birth.

John's birth was a miracle. Zechariah and Elizabeth were physically unable to have a child on their own. In first century Jewish thought, health problems were often considered symptoms of sin problems. If you had a medical condition, you must have done something wrong. You can see that in the story where some religious leaders brought a blind man to Jesus and asked him, "Who sinned – this guy or his parents?"

But Luke makes a point of the fact that it wasn't like that with Zechariah and Elizabeth. These people were squeaky clean. Zechariah was of the priest class – an influential, respected family. He had married well – Elizabeth also came from a line of priests. He worked in the temple. They lived good lives.

Children were considered a blessing, and if anybody deserved to be blessed, it was these two. Yet God had withheld that from them. And they had no way of making it happen on their own.

The state Zechariah and Elizabeth found themselves in is one of the "befores" we're talking about, and it was a state of powerlessness. There was nothing they could do to get what they wanted.

I would define powerlessness like this:

Lacking the strength, authority or resources to change your situation.

Any one of those can stand between you and what you want to be different. And even if you have a certain amount of power in one area of your life, you may not in another area. Zechariah had a lot of influence and authority in his job, but he had no authority over his circumstances. Elizabeth apparently had great moral strength in the way she lived, but she didn't have the physical strength to change her body's makeup.

Can you relate to that sense of being powerless? Lots of people know exactly how Zechariah and Elizabeth felt about wanting kids, but powerlessness touches far more areas of life than just infertility. Powerlessness is wanting to heal a relationship but not being able to. Wanting to get ahead financially and never quite making it. Wanting to escape your past. Wanting to change something about yourself. Wanting to change something about somebody else or alleviate their crisis only to find we can't.

We've all got areas where we feel powerless. Nobody likes feeling helpless. It makes me think of the Charlie Brown Christmas tree. All withered and lifeless and pathetic. Who wants a tree that can't even keep its own needles on? Being powerless makes us feel stuck and inadequate.

There's a little cycle we slip into when we feel powerless. I know acronyms are corny and overused, but they can help you remember things, and you can use the word POWER to talk about this cycle and I think it works. First, we

P - Pretend it's not true

We go into denial. "I am powerful. I can too do this." We refuse to accept that we don't have what it takes. . I'm sure it took a long time to sink in for Zechariah and Elizabeth that a baby wasn't coming. Year after year they probably kept telling themselves there was still a chance. Illusions do not die easily.

When it finally becomes clear to us that we do in fact have a problem, we then move into the next phase and begin to

O - Obsess over what I want

We fixate on what we cannot have. I remember one time years ago when I wanted desperately to change jobs. I couldn't find one for the life of me. Nobody wanted to hire me, if you can believe it. The more I looked, the more I wanted to escape and the more depressed I became in my job. It was a vicious cycle.

We obsess. As part of that obsession, we turn our attention to the next phase of the cycle and try to

W - Work harder to find power

Remember the old comic book ads for Charles Atlas' body building? The skinny Mac got beat up on the beach, so he decided to take matters into his own hands and bulk up. Then he went back and punched the bully and got the girl.

It's ridiculous, but it worked because it tapped into something basic in human nature. The obvious solution to us when we don't have power is to seek it out. There's got to be a way. How can I overcome this? How can I increase my authority or strength or resources?

We try and try to increase our power. When that doesn't work, I slide into the next phase as I start to

E - Equate myself with the problem

I view myself in light of what I can't do. Elizabeth thought of herself as a childless woman. She described it as her shame. Her powerlessness started to define her. And that's especially dangerous with things like illness or infertility that are completely out of your control.

Do you have a weakness that you think of as part of your identity? The more wrapped up we become in fighting our powerlessness, the larger that feeling becomes until it takes over who we are. It shames us. It affects our self image and our sense of worth.

Finally, we end up in the bottom of the barrel as we

R - Retreat in defeat

By the time the angel appeared to Zechariah, Zechariah and Elizabeth were no longer dreaming of babies. You can tell from Zechariah's response that he's resigned himself to being childless the rest of his life.

Call it being realistic, call it acceptance. We come to a point where we no longer believe it is possible for our situation to change. We give up. We may get depressed, discouraged, bitter or cynical. We figure powerlessness has won the day.

Would you say that's a pretty accurate description of what happens when you feel powerless? It's one of those sensations that we universally hate. Our reaction to it is first to fight it, then when we don't beat it, we are crushed by the weight of it.

That's not a very rosy picture. And I'm not here to say we should learn to love it. But what I WOULD like to suggest is that there's another way to think about powerlessness. It can be a crucial time in our relationship with God. It's one of these before situations – a place where God brings us when he's about to do something new. It creates a vacuum he can fill.

Sometimes God doesn't act the way we expect in those situations. Look at what he did with Zechariah. Rather than immediately come to take away his powerlessness, God let him stew in it a while. In fact, he actually made him even less powerful. The angel took away Zechariah's ability to speak. He couldn't even talk for the whole pregnancy.

When we're needing power, we expect God to swoop in with the answer and send us on our way. But sometimes he first reduces us even further, taking us deeper into powerlessness.

Elizabeth is described as being barren, unable to produce children. That barrenness describes Zechariah as well – old and worn out, robbed of speech, helpless. They are in a barren wasteland, a dry desert. That's what powerlessness is -- it's a spiritual wilderness.

That's why I think it is so remarkable that the Bible describes their baby boy, John the Baptist this way:

Luke 3:4

The voice of one crying in the wilderness: "Make ready the way of the Lord."

It is in that wilderness that we can hear God's voice. It is in the wilderness that we prepare the way of the Lord. It is when we are powerless and without our own resources that God steps in and provides.

When we find ourselves in a spot where we have no power -- no control over our circumstances – we don't have to slide into the cycle we talked about. We don't have to choose between fighting it or just giving up. Instead, we can use our own powerlessness as a chance to try to hear God's voice, that voice in the wilderness that's crying out for us to get prepared. I think we can begin doing that by asking ourselves three questions. First,

Where am I looking for my worth?

As I said before, we equate power with worth. Tom Parks and I were talking this week about what makes Jason Bourne from the Bourne Supremacy movies so cool. He knows things and sees things before other people. He speaks more languages than other people. He can beat anybody in a fight. Every guy would like to be like him. Why? Because it's cool to have that kind of power. We put great worth on power. We regularly size people up by what power they seem to have to make money or help us get where we want to go.

So when we feel powerless, we feel worthless. When I can't do what I want to do, whatever that may be, I start to think I'm less of a person. I'm not valuable if I don't have power. Since I can't do enough, I must not be good enough.

That's a misplaced sense of our identity. **Sometimes our pursuit of what we want is really a pursuit of feeling valuable.** We think we will feel better about ourselves once we achieve that impossible goal.

Part of how God uses powerlessness in our lives is to help us realize that he's the true source of our worth. Elizabeth saw that. When she finally got pregnant, she said,

"The Lord has done this for me," she said. "In these days he has shown his favor and taken away my disgrace among the people."

God is the one who takes away our disgrace. God is the one who loves us unconditionally and sees us as being valuable – not because of what we can do, but because he made us and chose us for himself.

To prepare the way of the Lord is to come to terms with what is impossible for me and realizing God loves me anyway. My worth doesn't come from my power to do anything, but from God's power to love of me in spite of my limitations.

Secondly, being powerless lets us ask the question

Where am I looking for my joy?

Most of the time, when we're powerless, we see that elusive goal as being the place where we will find joy. "Once I get that raise, I'll be happy." "If that girl in math said she liked me, that would rock." "If our house was just a little bigger..."

When our joy revolves around our circumstances, it's going to be very shaky and something that's just out of reach or around the corner. But true joy is accessible today, and we forfeit it when we spend our energy wishing for some tomorrow that never arrives.

The angel told Zechariah that John would be a joy to him, but not because he was the baby he'd always wanted. It was because John was going to play an important role in bringing people back to God. In fact, the angel said many people would find joy because of John.

Power may be out of reach, but joy isn't. The secret to joy is found in reconnecting with God through Jesus and helping other people do the same. That's completely independent of any other situation in our world.

1 Peter 1:8-9

Though you have not seen him, you love him; and even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the goal of your faith, the salvation of your souls.

These early believers who were struggling so much and persecuted still had great joy in spite of their circumstances. The Greek there is literally the word for jumping with joy – They were jumping with an inexpressible and glorious joy, because they were receiving

the goal of their faith, the salvation of their souls. Their joy was wrapped up in what Jesus had done for them.

There's something very freeing in finding joy in God's actions instead of what we do. If I'm responsible for achieving my own joy, it's going to make me anxious and stressed as I try to make it happen. When it's based on Jesus, I can breathe again.

Has the joy gone missing from your life? Where are you looking to get it back? We can end up empty-handed if we chase the wrong thing. When we're powerless to reach it, we can pray to God like David did and say,

Psalm 51:12

Restore to me the joy of your salvation...

Let that be my source of contentment and strength. That's the only thing that's sure and secure, the only thing that will let me be centered instead of anxious.

Ralph Waldo Emerson once wrote, "You shall have joy, or you shall have power, said God;; you shall not have both."

Joy can be found when we are powerless, because we find it in the only one who has the power to give us joy.

Where am I look for worth? Where am I looking for joy? A final question powerlessness lets us ask is

Where am I looking for my hope?

That first Advent candle we lit this morning is the candle of hope. Christmas is all about hope. Great. So what does that have to do with powerlessness?

Everything, really. Because we usually pin our hopes on our own power. Look at Zechariah. When the angel told him he was going to have a boy, he immediately began thinking of it in terms of his own abilities to raise a child. "So how is this going to work? We're no spring chickens anymore, you know." His instinct was to frame the question in terms of his own power.

The angel silenced him right then and there. He said, "I stand in front of God Almighty. I came to you with a message about his awesome strength, and you're asking me how you're going to pull it off? I'm going to let you think about that in silence for the next nine months."

We all make ourselves the source of our own hope. We run to ourselves far more often than we run to God. And when we can't come through for ourselves, what do we do? Instead of turning to God, we give up hope.

Just like we equate powerlessness with worthlessness, we also equate powerlessness with hopelessness. They are not the same thing. At the end of the day, the good news is that there is still hope – it is just in a different place.

Here's the ultimate value of powerlessness: Getting to the point where we learn to trust and hope in God. God lets us run out of our own steam so that we turn to him. I like the way the Message version translates Psalm 33:

Psalm 33:17-19

*Horsepower is not the answer;
no one gets by on muscle alone.
Watch this: God's eye is on those who respect him,
the ones who are looking for his love.
He's ready to come to their rescue in bad times;
in lean times he keeps body and soul together.*

God is our hope when there's no other reason to hope. Some of you are hearing this this morning and thinking, "That might be true, but Zechariah and Elizabeth still got their baby in the end. I want the baby. I want God to give me what I've been powerless to get. Can't I trust him and still get what I want?"

God may answer your prayer that way. Although I think what Zechariah and Elizabeth got was far different than they would have asked for. They were so old they would have always been mistaken for John's grandparents. They probably didn't live to see John's ministry. And their son would be executed while he was still a young man. Not exactly their dream come true.

But hope doesn't reside in a particular answer to a particular prayer. It's in the person of Jesus himself.

There was a story in the news this week about Jesus – actually Haysoos – Manuel Jesus Cordova Soberanes. The 26 year old man crossed the border from Mexico to America on foot illegally and had been walking for 2 days straight, coming to find work as a bricklayer. He was about 50 miles outside of Tucson when he came across a 9-year old boy named Christopher wandering in the desert.

It turned out that Christopher and his mother had been in a car crash and she had been killed. Christopher was dazed and confused and walking around holding a mirror from the van. It was cold out and he was just wearing shorts and a T-shirt.

Manuel faced a decision, because to stay and help the boy meant he would end up being deported as soon as they were found. But he told reporters later that he was a father himself and the thought of leaving the boy never even was an option for him.

Manuel couldn't speak any English and Christopher didn't know any Spanish. But he led Manuel to a canyon and showed him where the car had gone over the edge. Manuel

knew right away that the mom had died, and he wanted to console the boy, so he just sat with him.

He climbed down to the van and found some cookies and chocolate to feed Christopher. He gave him the sweater he was wearing. He built a bonfire to keep them warm through the night, and while Christopher slept, Manuel kept watch and tended the fire.

Fourteen hours went by before a group of hunters came along. Manuel stayed the entire time. The hunters called for help, and Christopher was taken to the hospital, while Manuel was sent back to Mexico. But authorities credit him with saving Christopher's life. The mayor of his hometown called him a hero and said, "He gave up everything to save that boy."

I don't want to get sidetracked in a discussion about illegal immigration this morning. My point is simply this. If Christopher was hoping for a rescue, I'm sure it didn't look like Manuel. . He couldn't bring back his mom. He had no way of taking Christopher out of that horrible situation. No car. No cell phone. He couldn't even talk to him.

But Manuel still saved his life. He stayed with him, fed him, guarded him, kept him warm. It didn't look like a rescue, but it was.

God's hope for us doesn't always look a powerful rescue. It's more like Manuel's approach. He meets us in our powerlessness. He stays by our side in our hardship. He feeds us, he guards us, he keeps us warm. And he gives up everything to get us through it.

The apostle Paul experienced powerlessness. We're not sure what the ailment was, but he had chronic physical pain that wouldn't go away. It was a "before" in his life that turned into a space for God to speak to him. Paul gives us a very personal perspective and says this:

2 Corinthians 12:7-10

Satan's angel did his best to get me down; what he in fact did was push me to my knees. No danger then of walking around high and mighty! At first I didn't think of it as a gift, and begged God to remove it. Three times I did that, and then he told me,

*My grace is enough; it's all you need.
My strength comes into its own in your weakness.*

Once I heard that, I was glad to let it happen. I quit focusing on the handicap and began appreciating the gift. It was a case of Christ's strength moving in on my weakness. Now I take limitations in stride, and with good cheer, these limitations that cut me down to size — abuse, accidents, opposition, bad breaks. I just let Christ take over! And so the weaker I get, the stronger I become.

The weaker I get, the stronger I become. I go back to that Charlie Brown Christmas tree. I used to laugh at how different it looks at the end, as if it could grow new branches. But now I get it. It was the love of Charlie Brown that made that tree into something new – not the tree itself.

God loves us and makes us into something new, and we know that best when we know we're powerless to make ourselves new. Powerlessness ends up being one of the most optimistic places to be, because it's the place we come to know God's love and power. There's a voice calling in that wilderness, and it says, "Get ready for God. Prepare the way for him. He's going to do something new. He'll give you a new sense of worth. He'll renew your joy. And he'll give you a fresh cause for hope."

As we come to the Lord's table this morning, think about that one area where you feel most powerless. Ask Christ to meet you there, to transform that "before" into an "after".