



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

NOVEMBER 20, 2016
REIGN OF CHRIST SUNDAY

Back to the Beginning Luke 1:67-79; Colossians 1:11-20

I have realized over the years that I am a visual learner. If I see something or form an image of it, I can better understand it and remember it. Often, with an abstract concept, I develop an image that helps me to remember and relate to it.

For instance, when I think of the course of a year, beginning in January and continuing through December, I imagine a wide circle or ellipse on which each of the months, days, and significant events is located. The year begins at one point (usually sort of east in my mind) and moves counter-clockwise through the months and seasons. Mention a date or event to me and I see it on this circle of life through which we travel year after year.

I find this device quite helpful, although I have noticed that as the years go by, I seem to move faster and faster around this circle. I sometimes long for the days when months seemed to plod along without any hurry and each day was endlessly delightful.

I have also learned that there is a drawback to this method of looking at the year. If each year is seen as a cycle that simply repeats itself over and over, those years can become monotonous and boring. Nothing changes from year to year. Nothing new happens, nothing different occurs. I live as if I am on a hamster wheel busily going nowhere or I become like Bill Murray in the movie *Groundhog Day* and am doomed to repeat the same sequence of events over and over, year after year. I have to be careful that I don't begin thinking of my years as mundane cycle that plays over and over. For that reason, I turn to the Christian year calendar.

The Gregorian calendar (which has been in use for almost 500 years) keeps me on track to do the things I need to do and to stay in sync with everything that is happening in the world. It is a solar calendar that is orderly, precise, and reliable. The Christian calendar is different. While it also has order and reliability, it is based, not on the earth's relationship to the sun or a fixed arrangement of days that is repeated year after year. The Christian calendar is organized by seasons and is based on story--the story of God's

involvement with his people specifically through the life of Jesus Christ. The Christian calendar begins with the season of Advent and starts a month earlier than the beginning of the Gregorian calendar. Moreover, the start of the Christian calendar changes from year to year. This year the calendar begins anew next Sunday, November 27. Last year, it began on November 29. Next year it will begin on December 3.

The Christian calendar is based on story, not on time. It begins with prophesy and promise. It follows Jesus' life and teachings. It observes his struggles and challenges. It highlights his death and resurrection and follows the spread of the Gospel and the growth of the Church. As we move through the year, God's story becomes our story as we realize the ways in which what happened long ago intersects with what we do in this day and time.

Today is the final Sunday in the current Christian year. We know it as Christ the King Sunday or the Reign of Christ Sunday. This day, which always falls near our Thanksgiving celebration, is an affirmation that God in Christ is sovereign over all of life. No other power comes near to the authority God has over us.

Next week we will begin telling and living the story all over again as we enter into Advent. Yet, the experience is never quite the same because it is a dynamic story which has its historic features but is continually unfolding afresh in our lives.

Today, on the Reign of Christ Sunday, we are reminded to pay attention to the beginning of the story so that we will know where to look for its ending. We go back to the beginning to prepare for a new adventure of following Christ into another year of life. Luke begins the story:

Then his father Zechariah was filled with the Holy Spirit and spoke this prophecy: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke through the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we would be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us. Thus he has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors, and has remembered his holy covenant, the oath that he swore to our ancestor Abraham, to grant us that we, being rescued from the hands of our enemies, might serve him without fear, in holiness and righteousness before him all our days.

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

Luke 1:67-79

The story begins in Jerusalem. An elderly priest named Zechariah is serving his term at the holiest place on earth for Jews—the temple. As he goes about his duties, he has a visitor, but not an ordinary visitor. This guest is Gabriel, a messenger sent from God with special news for Zechariah. For years, long years, the priest and his wife have been praying to God about one simple request. Was it a prayer for healing? Help for settling a dispute? Comfort in old age? World peace? No. Their prayer all along had been for a child to bless their lives. And what was Gabriel there to announce? None other than the fact that God had at long last decided to answer their prayer with a son. A son! It was a great moment for Zechariah! Except that it wasn't.

Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth were advanced in age. They were elderly. Although he knew the story of Abram and Sarai all too well, Zechariah never dreamed such a thing could happen for him and his wife. It was absurd. They were too old for a child. People would talk. Gabriel listened respectfully to Zechariah's concerns and then told the priest that the sign that God would answer his prayer was that Zechariah would be silent until the child was born. He would not be able to speak. And so it was.

Nine months is a long time to be silent. Any time we stop talking, we have more time for thinking and Zechariah had a lot of time to think about what was happening. Back in the hill country, people were excited about the couple's surprise pregnancy, but they were not alone in such surprises. Elizabeth's young cousin, a maiden named Mary, traveled to see them and told her older relatives that she, too, had been visited by an angel who informed her that she would bear the Son of God!

Zechariah's son was born and the people of the village were eager to know his name. They assumed he would be named for his father, but the child's mother said, "No, his name will be John." The people motioned to Zechariah for confirmation. Isn't it odd that when someone cannot speak, we assume they cannot hear?! Reaching for something on which to write,

Zechariah confirmed his wife's words. John it would be! As soon as the local folks read his words, Zechariah found his voice again and started to speak.

I don't know what kind of speaker the priest was on any given Sabbath, but on this day he was eloquent. As the words flowed from his lips, they were poetic and profound. It was almost as if there were a melody accompanying them: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has looked favorably on his people and redeemed them. He has raised up a mighty savior for us in the house of his servant David" It was a song of blessing, "The Benedictus," as we know it now.

Professor Karla Suomali reminds us that there are two aspects to blessing.¹ There is the element of praise which is offered from humans to God. It is our thanksgiving to God for all that God does for us. This blessing of God is the focus of the week ahead when we take time to acknowledge all of the goodness God brings into our lives. The other kind of blessing confers power and promise. It may be given from human to human, from God to humans, or from humans to God. It is the blessing of potentiality that we confer on someone when they begin a new venture or when a new life comes into our lives. Even when we sit down to begin a meal, we ask blessing for the food to become more than mere nutrition, but to empower us to the service of God.

Zechariah praised God for all God had done for his people. But he also conferred power and possibility upon his infant son still ruddy from the womb. Zechariah was filled with the Spirit of God when he spoke things he had been contemplating for nine months. It was his personal Pentecost. He blessed God and he blessed his son:

And you, child, will be called the prophet of the Most High; for you will go before the Lord to prepare his ways, to give knowledge of salvation to his people by the forgiveness of their sins. By the tender mercy of our God, the dawn from on high will break upon us, to give light to those who sit in darkness and in the shadow of death, to guide our feet into the way of peace."

Zechariah blessed his baby boy and empowered him to live into the story that was already unfolding in the womb of Mary as the Savior of the

¹Karla Suomali, "Commentary on Luke 1:68-79," *Working Preacher* (November 20, 2016); available online at: https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=3069.

world was being formed. Baby John would become a prophet of God to invite people into the greatest story that would ever be told.

That is a lot to lay on a newborn baby! We gift our infants with the shirts and hats of our favorite college teams, but few of us pronounce the career path that child will follow, much less that they will herald the coming of the Messiah. That is what Zechariah did. That is the beginning of the story. And today we celebrate the fulfillment of that prophesy. John did prepare the way for Jesus. Jesus was the Son of God, the Savior of the world. Today he does reign over heaven and earth and the entire universe, worlds without end!

The conclusion of the Christian year is not simply a recap of highlights from the past twelve months. It is not a revisiting of headlines that made the news nor is it the choosing of the Christian of the Year. The end of the Christian Year is a celebration of the fact that everything we have recalled and contemplated throughout the year has come to fruition. We return to where it all began with promise and possibility enough to change the world, with hope and blessing enough to change individual lives, and with power and peace enough to make all people aware that God reigns supreme.

We come to the end of the Christian Year to remember how the story began and to remind ourselves that we are just as much a part of the story as were Zechariah and Elizabeth and John and Mary and Joseph. We are a part of the story because God's story is our story. We, too, have inherited the blessing. We, too, have received the calling.

That is why we come here to this sacred place week by week, month by month, season by season, year by year. We come, not to mark time on a calendar, but to live out a story, to receive a blessing, to prepare the way for others to enter into the story as well. If we don't do those things, the message will die. The story will not be told. The blessing will not be conferred. We come to worship and learn and serve, to understand ourselves as characters in the unfolding story of God's power and grace. We come to experience his tender mercy which can change us and the world.

However you understand and imagine the unfolding of the calendar year, you experience the story of God moving among us through Jesus Christ in your heart and mind. God walks among us, bringing the Gospel alive within us. That is serious and important business. It is worth of our time, our commitment, our very lives. Today we come back to the beginning so that we will know how to get to the end. Amen.

November 20, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

How often it is that we dwell on the inconveniences and challenges of life, O God from whom all our blessings flow, rather than being mindful of the variety and abundance of your gifts to us. But we come to worship this day and in this season with hearts overflowing with gratitude because of all of the goodness with which you have graced our lives. In the past week alone, many of us have enjoyed the support and companionship of family and friends; an excess of food and other comforts; the satisfaction of meaningful work as well as time for rest and play; the freedom to make choices and express our opinions; opportunities to worship, to reflect, to enjoy things of beauty; and countless other blessings which enrich our days but which often pass us by unnoticed and unappreciated. May we offer all that we have and all that we are, not only in this season but indeed each day of our lives, both in grateful response for your generosity and in humble acknowledgment that every moment we enjoy is a gift from you.

Even as we offer our praise and gratitude, Loving God, we recognize that ours is a world where many suffer more pain than we are likely to experience and have needs greater than we can comprehend. Give us compassionate hearts, creative minds and willing hands that we might do the work of loving others in your name. When we experience good health, help us to remember those who suffer. When we gather with those who love us, help us to remember those who are lonely. When we have enough to eat, help us to remember those who are hungry. When we are tired from our work, help us to remember those who are jobless. When we come in out of the cold, help us to remember those who are homeless. When we enjoy moments of quiet rest, help us to remember those whose nations are filled with the sounds of war. When we experience security and contentment because of the comforts and privileges we enjoy, help us to remember those who live in fear. But may we not stop at remembering each of these, your beloved children. May we work to ensure that all our brothers and sisters in the human family have enough, not just to survive, but also to flourish and to become all that you have created them to be. May we create in our world, in our community and in our lives a welcome place for all who are in need of your light and hope and peace. And may we raise our hearts and voices to join all creation in joyful songs of thanksgiving to you, O God, our Creator, our Redeemer, our Friend. Amen.

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