

# The Park Road Pulpit

*Sermons from Park Road Baptist Church*

Russ and Amy Jacks Dean, Pastors

***The Confusion of Tense:  
Past, Present, and Future in the Advent of God***

*Psalm 18.1-3; Luke 1.67-79*

Russ Dean, December 16, 2007



I first heard the quip spoken as a critique of former President, Ronald Reagan, during the Iran-Contra affair, though the same has been spoken of any number of embattled leaders since, both Democrat and Republican. In the face of questions from ethics or impeachment committees, politicians' memories seem to quickly fade. (The same is surely true of athletes, entertainers, and fallen pastors as well!) Former Attorney General Alberto Gonzales is the most recent example, repeating endlessly in his congressional testimony, "I don't recall... I'm sorry, I can't remember... I don't recall..." Of Reagan, one commentator suggested wittily and shrewdly that the issue at hand could have been quickly settled if only those involved could have discerned, "What all the President had forgotten – and just when he had forgotten it!"

In the last few years I have grown fascinated with the process through which our scripture came to be. We read with 2,000 year hind-sight, and through glasses, rose-colored by the certainty of orthodox doctrine. But long ago, before there were 66 books we could call "the Bible," before even the Church could uniformly agree on what should be called "scripture" and how it should be interpreted, there were people, like you and me, sharing their experiences of faith as they occurred. And there were others, also like you and me, eager to pass on what they had heard. Years, decades later, someone else (yes, just like you and me) took the time to interpret and record these interpretations that

had been passed along through worship and shared testimony, and this is what we read as our scripture. But it is those original experiences that fascinate me. When I read Zechariah's story, for example, I really am intrigued to know, not what he forgot and when he forgot it, but what Zechariah knew – and when he knew it.

Last week Amy taught us that the first of our Christmas Canticles, Mary's Song, is a song of praise, not primarily about what God was going to do, but a poem of praise, like the ancient Psalms, of God's past activity. Mary sang praise to the Spirit whose *"mercy is... from generation to generation,"* to the God who has *shown strength... scattered the proud... brought down the powerful... lifted up the lowly... filled the hungry... sent the rich empty away...* (Luke 1). Mary sang her praise not just in the hope of the child she carried, but because the God of her worship was one she knew to have already acted in the lives and history of her people.

Yet as we planned worship this week Anne Hunter Eidson said that she was confused by all this, because she thought these prophecies were statements of confidence in what God was promising to do through the Christ. Albeit, written in past tense, aren't these actually prophecies of a future yet to be? When Zechariah says, *"for God has looked favorably on God's people and redeemed them,"* isn't he saying God "has redeemed them – in the birth of a coming Messiah? When he says, *"God has raised up a mighty savior,"* isn't he saying that his prophecy is part of the birth announcement of that savior? When he concludes, *"thus God has shown the mercy promised to our ancestors,"* isn't he admitting that technically, officially, this promised mercy is not yet delivered?

What is it? Past, or Future? Now, I'm confused!

And, when I try to read the text in the mind of Zechariah, I get even more confused because I keep thinking, what did he know, and when did he know it! One commentary suggests that Zechariah's hymn of praise is "Jewish in form, but Christian in orientation."<sup>1</sup> It looks back to Jewish history and scripture and speaks in a language that could be taken right out of the mouth of one of Israel's prophets, yet it looks (knowingly) to a fulfillment in Jesus Christ.

Zechariah was a faithful Jew. A priest raised on the prophecy of the coming of an Anointed One who would restore Israel's national, political, military and cultural life to the status it enjoyed under the legendary King David. When he was given this vision, that his son would be the forerunner of Messiah, then, was it the Jewish Messiah he saw, on whose image his own faith had been cast, or was Zechariah anticipating a Prince of Peace? Did he really have in mind a Messiah who would be born in poverty and raised in the peasant class of Israel, who would submit to baptism by Zechariah's own son and offer a ministry that critiqued the religion of Israel? Did he envision one who would suffer the little children to come, who sat with women as equals, who shared meals with prostitutes and tax collectors, who preached God's mercy for all people? Could Zechariah have even conceived of a leader who, instead of raising the military status of Israel, admonished the love of enemies and who demonstrated this love by giving his own life into the hands of the hated, occupying power of Rome?

How could he have known this? What did he know and when did he know it? Zechariah sang his song before the birth of John, who would be known as "The Baptist," and he looked back to Jewish scripture, which was all he knew, and in doing so, he

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<sup>1</sup> This was a document concerning the four canticles that Anne Hunter Eidson passed on to me. It came from an internet source, and I have now lost it! My thanks and apologies to the scholar to whom I should be giving credit.

looked forward to a particular kind of Advent of God. Yet these words of Zechariah, written before the birth and life and death of Jesus, were shaped as they were recorded for us by Luke, who wrote a few decades after the death of Jesus. Luke wrote Zechariah's song after Easter. He knew the "end of the story," as Paul Harvey likes to put it.

I don't know what Zechariah knew, and when he knew it, but if I can be honest, I'll tell you that neither a fully past nor a fully future interpretation sits very well with me. Amy's commentary tells us God has acted. As people of faith, we affirm this. But while she was preaching, the skeptic in me thought, "Yeah, right. Show me the proud scattered, the powerful brought down, the lowly lifted, the hungry filled, the rich sent empty away..."

And when I think of the scripture, in the mind of Zechariah, as a promise which would be fulfilled in that coming one, I am still not fully satisfied. For the cynic in me, likewise, thinks of my Jewish friends who hear our claim that the Messiah has come, and see a world that is still so far from redeemed. Christian theology, to defend against this valid critique, has too often made faith about a future which cannot be challenged. In this future, God will finally finish the work of redemption.

Neither a theology of the past, nor a theology of the future will adequately serve the reality of a people who can only live in present tense.

So, I suppose last week was just a foreshadowing of the confusion I have experienced this week. And then we sang the hymn of response to Amy's sermon... and worship happened. I don't know how long it takes you to worship, but if I get one good moment, one right word, one revealing insight, one hopeful glimpse, that's about all I can handle in one worship service! I had it last week when I sang verse four of "My soul

gives glory to my God.” Amy had convinced me that Mary’s hymn of praise, in anticipation of a Christ who will reveal the salvation of God, was about the work of God in the past, yet the aggravating doubter would not quit asking his question (But has this really happened – either in the ancient past or in Jesus?) And amidst my mental confusion we sang these words, “Love casts the mighty from their thrones, (love) promotes the insecure, (love) leaves hungry spirits satisfied... the rich seem suddenly poor.” And I realized: love never acts in past tense, nor does it ever put us off to some future day. Love casts... promotes... leaves... love always and only knows the present. When we know love, when we sense love, when we experience love, life is given its meaning. If we have love, we need nothing else. Far from coveting what they have, then, when God truly comes to me, when Advent really happens, I know the rich have nothing I need and the powerful have no hold on me.

God, whose Spirit was revealed in the face of Jesus Christ, and potentially so in every present moment, is all I need.

Every past event revealing the work of God (“God healed... restored... saved...”) is a legitimate future promise. Because we have seen the presence of God among us, we can trust our future to this present. God, again, will heal... restore... save... And every future hope, even those outrageous claims like the song we will sing next week, “*On earth, peace, good will to all people,*” is a hope that has already been fulfilled among us. The examples are numerous – we only have to look for them.

After decades of rule by a tiny white minority, South Africa's blacks were given the chance to governance when Nelson Mandela was elected to leadership. After years of an often brutal apartheid, instead of seeking revenge and reversing the violence of leadership, South Africa's leaders chose to move a nation forward with a "Truth and Reconciliation Commission." In this bold venture, victims and families of victims were brought face to face with their abusers. These difficult meetings offered opportunities for face to face exchange, and for the hope of true reconciliation among people who had been separated by violence. Sentences were meted out, but abuser and abused had opportunity to speak to one another, offering words from the heart, words which put these people on a road to forgiveness and peace.

*Peace on earth...*

A program in the U.S. penal system offers individuals and families an opportunity to meet together with the perpetrators of violent crime. A mother, whose daughter was murdered by a young lover, now meets regularly with her daughter's killer, who is serving out a life sentence for his crime. Over time, they have come to know each other, and though the past cannot be changed, a grieving mother and a grieving convict exchange hugs when their prison encounters end.

*Good will to all people...*

If we look only to the past, we will miss it. If we look only to the future, we will not recognize it. God has been among us from the very beginning; God will be with us to the very end; but only in the present can we truly know it. The scripture says that

Zechariah was filled with the spirit, that is, he had an understanding of the way God works among us, so I think he knew as much as we can ever know – that this tension will always be with us. It is the collision of the confusion of the already and the not yet, and these tensions of time find their fulfillment in the present. Zechariah found God at work in his own time, and he anticipated the truth spoken so well by Leonardo Boff: “The reign of God, the eschatological liberation of the world, is already in process, is already being established. It takes shape in concrete modifications of actual life.”

God’s final, ultimate, complete work, the work of love which only can complete this infinite universe of ours is being done in every present moment. We can see it in Mary. We can see it in Zechariah. We can see it in Jesus. And we can see it, if we will, in Scott and Sue, Tim and Debbie, Wendy and Jim, Melanie and Al, Lyndsay and Alex, Pearl and Bennett... You can even see it in your own heart if you look hard enough.

If you don’t know it, let this be the moment you open your heart to the deepest reality this world can ever know...

God is with us. Don’t be confused. That’s why we call it the present.

May it be so!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The week after I preached this sermon I received the following e-mail from a woman who is a careful listener, and who responds, somewhat regularly, to my sermons (often, but not always so glowingly!) It is moving to know that something I say might ever have an impact on someone else, so I share it as an expression of humility, gratitude, and a sense of deep satisfaction.

“ This must be fast -- but I was deeply moved by your sermon yesterday. The notion that love is not primarily past or future but PRESENT was powerful. It really hit me, and I found/find myself thinking of the many ways in which it is true. I suspect this sermon will be with me for a long while -- I'll be pondering this and trying to live into it for a long time -- it was quite profound, more than I can take in all at once. I also loved your notion (which I share) that a good worship service is one in which I have even just one moment of opening, enlightenment, new vision. BTW -- I still ponder and try to live into the slime mold sermon too -- one of my all-time favorites! (Really!)”

EMAIL FROM LEDAYNE MCLEESE POLASKI

Dear Russ --

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BTW -- I still ponder and try to live into the slime mold sermon too -- one of my all-time favorites! (Really!)

Peace and Grace,

LeDayne

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