

A Sermon for DaySpring Baptist Church
“Something New is Happening”
By Eric Howell
Luke 1:68-79
December 6, 2009

For several reasons I can't believe that I am about to open a sermon with a baseball analogy. It's December, right in the best part of football season, and, as I stated in a sermon many months ago, I think baseball—at least baseball on TV—is kind of slow and boring. And yet, in all my years of preaching sermons, only one time have I actually been booed and it wasn't at the suggestion of some difficult Christian discipline, or at a controversial take on the ethical and political implications of the gospel, or a critique of modern western economic practices, or for a theological claim. The only time I've been booed in a sermon was here, with you people, when I said that baseball is boring. This is central Texas. You people are supposed to be safe, God-fearing, straight-living, pragmatic, reasonable, FOOTBALL-loving people.

I recall that Alfred Delp writes that, “The primary condition for a fruitful and rewarding advent is renunciation, surrender. We must let go of all our mistaken dreams, our conceited poses, and arrogant gestures, all the pretenses with which we hope to deceive ourselves and others. If we fail to do this, stark reality may take hold of us and rouse us forcibly in a way that will entail both anxiety and suffering.” So, as an act of contrition . . . a baseball analogy about the opening of the gospel of Luke.

Luke stands on the pitcher's mound, stares down the catcher, winds up and throws an easy fastball down the middle for his first pitch. His opening is as straight as an arrow, no funny business, no misdirection, just simple and straightforward. It's like we were taught to make presentations back in school. Say what you are going to say. Say it. Then say what you said. This is Luke saying what he is going to say . . . verses one-four. Theophilus means ‘beloved of God’ and the book of Acts, which is volume two, opens with an address to the same person. No one knows if there was actually someone named Theophilus that Luke wrote this to, or if you and I are theophilus. We are all beloved of God.

So, there's people teaching out there about Jesus of Nazareth . . . maybe about the kind of stuff He taught . . . and the kinds of things He did . . . maybe some stories about His birth . . . surely an account of His death . . . no doubt about His resurrection. And the teaching about Jesus surely included what it meant to be a follower of Him—what it meant to be saved and what it meant to have your life shaped by allegiance to this One. Who knows how developed the teaching was by the late first-century? But Luke, a physician, decided that some order needed to be brought to the teaching and so undertook to write down “an orderly account for you, beloved of God.”

First four verses, fast ball down the middle. What you would assume from Luke's introduction is that every pitch from here out will be a softball (fastball) down the middle—the rest of the book will be just this straightforward. After all, it's an orderly account. You might assume that not only is ‘fastball down the middle’ a description of the way the story is going to be told, but also what kind of story this is. You might

assume this story about Jesus is an orderly kind of story, straightforward, predictable, usual, maybe even boring.

You might assume this story about Jesus is the sort of story that the kind of response it asks of us is also one of the same shape—predictable, conformist, institutional, orderly.

Perhaps this is making too much of a brief little introduction. But I've seen the way Christians live. I've seen the way we live. If there's one thing that can be more dull than baseball, it's the lives of we church people. We very often live in such a way that if our lives served as the introduction to someone of the gospel, they might assume there's nothing really to see here that's all that challenging or all that interesting.

For some people, a life that is not that challenging and not that interesting would be a welcome change from the struggle of chaos and uncertainty. For a person's life that is tossed on the waves of the sea, the gospel often arrives as a settling and ordering promise. There is a reason why we love the image of Jesus as the rock of our salvation, solid ground on which to stand. We know the alternatives that the world gives us are shifting sands, and it's vital for the soul to have solid ground. There's a reason we love the image of Jesus as the Good Shepherd, gently caring for and leading His sheep to the quiet waters, that we may lie down in green pastures. When life is so often tumultuous rapids and barren soil, we aren't looking for many more challenges. Some of us need a few more fastballs down the middle to hit in life. It seems like we've been striking out a lot more than getting on base. At some points in life, Jesus is the desperately needed center of peace. And I don't want to somehow take that away. For many of us, many of us here, we come to Jesus, even if we can only muster the spiritual energy for this one hour a week, we come needing to rest in Him and find something we can trust in, believe in, cling to for another week. Sometimes we are just trying to make it until Friday without giving up and we come to hear God, or maybe just be with other people who seem to hear God from time to time, to find a settled place deep within amidst the storms that rage in our lives and in our hearts.

And I don't want to take that away, so I want to suggest gently this next point. Luke's first offering may be right down the middle, but Luke's next pitch and it seems almost every pitch after that, is a curve ball. And that says something about what happens in the story, and it says everything about what kind of story the gospel really is. The gospel is a story full of surprises and is itself a surprising story. It is an impossible story about the impossible. It disorders and reorders the lives of those in the story and the lives of those who live into the story.

Luke opens with Zechariah, which you think is going to be another fastball, but don't be fooled. Zechariah was an elderly, righteous, respectable, distinguished, responsible priest of Israel. He was entrusted with the honor of entering the temple, praying for the people and then announcing their prayers had been heard in proper liturgical fashion. He was the kind of person who could be trusted to say the right thing in the right way, to have his shoes polished, and his necktie on straight. He would be articulate, educated, and just right every time. In short, he was the face of organized religion at its best. So what's all this we hear, or more precisely don't hear from him, as he comes out of the temple to give us assurance that our prayers have been heard by

God? This ritual is regular, predictable, and liturgical. Everyone knows his or her role. He goes in. We stand outside and wait. We pray out here for a while, while he goes in there and prays for us. And then, after a bit, he comes out and announces, “your prayers have been heard.” We say, “Thanks be to God” and everyone goes home. It’s nice. But what’s this? He was in there forever, and now he’s not saying a word, but flailing his arms around, gesturing wildly. He looks more Pentecostal than Episcopalian, minus the speaking in tongues. Something happened when he was there in the temple praying. It would be more assuring if he would speak in tongues—any tongue, rather than stand there with those wild eyes. What’s the matter Zechariah, angel got your tongue? Curveball. Disorder. Something big is happening.

For nine months Zechariah was silent. I’m sure we’ve all thought some preachers were struck dumb, but not many have been struck mute. His silence was because he didn’t believe an angel’s announcement that he and his wife, an old, barren couple, would have a baby. But there was her baby bump. Impossible. Zechariah was speechless. But his silence was something more. It was a sign. The priest had become a prophet, and his silence was a sign of the long silence and absence of God. The last words of the last book in the Old Testament, now hundreds of years old, “I will send you Elijah the prophet before the great and awesome day of the Lord comes.” The angel’s message to Zechariah quoted this exact promise and went on, “Your son will be called John, but he will come in the spirit and power of Elijah. The day of the Lord comes soon.” Zechariah’s name by the way means, “God remembers.” I think he and his silence were signs to the people that even in God’s silence, God does not forget you. Curveball. Disorder. Something good is happening.

Now the time came for Elizabeth to give birth, and she bore a son. The day came to name him. All their friends gathered around for the ceremony. Poor Zechariah is over there in the corner. By now maybe they’ve sort of forgotten about him. Someone else takes charge. No doubt a man steps forward to speak. Men are always quick to fill holy silence with their words. So a man steps forward with full assurance of tradition and expectation and what is right. “His name shall be Zechariah, Jr.” “No,” Elizabeth speaks up (a woman correcting a man? Speaking authoritatively? Making decisions? What is going on here?) “No,” she said, “His name shall be John.” “No, no,” the man responds, gently correcting her silliness, “It’s a nice name and all, but no one in your family is named that.” So they made signs to the father, over in the corner asking him to correct his foolish wife. (Kind of funny. They made signs? He can still hear!) But the father takes a writing tablet and scratches out, “His name is John.” Curveball. Disorder. Something different is happening.

And then, to his surprise and everyone’s, the preacher gets his voice back. God remembers. God remembered. Zechariah’s tongue was loosed and from his mouth poured praise and blessing to God. If Zechariah’s silence was a sign of God’s silence, then maybe his speaking was a sign that the Word of God would be heard again in Israel. Curveball again. Reorder. Something new is happening.

One surprising twist after another. We see already that this is not a story about the humdrum, the normal, the regular, or even the predictable, and we haven’t even talked yet about Mary or wise men, or a manger. This is a story about the impossible and

nothing less. The gospel is about the impossible happening and about the lives that it orders, disorders, and reorders.

Later on in the story, we'll meet Jairus, a ruler whose daughter's sickness brought him to the feet of Jesus where he bowed and asked for her healing. Jesus went, "*Talitha cum.*" He said, "Arise, my child." And she did.

And then we'll meet Zaccheus, a man who had done so wrong for so long to so many people that he was outcast until Jesus came in his home and into his heart.

And there are others. Today, December 6, is the feast day for St. Nicholas, a fourth-century bishop in southern Turkey known for his generosity. One of the most famous stories about him is that he threw bags of gold through the window of a poor family's home whose daughters would have been sold into slavery. The gold is said to have landed in the family's shoes, which were drying by the fire. And children since then have left shoes or stockings out by the fire in hopes that another St. Nicholas might leave a little something.

And then there's Polycarp, who was burned at the stake for believing in Jesus, and my friend, bishop Peter Story, who found himself with a gun pointed at his head because he stood with his African brothers and sisters in the final resistance to apartheid. And there's Lottie Moon, who gave her life to serve and witness to the Chinese, and there's Francis, who left his inheritance to live a simple life, and there's Millard Fuller, a very successful business man, who with his wife, sold everything they had, moved to an intentional Christian community named koinonia farms in Americus, Georgia, and then decided that people ought to have a roof over their heads and started a little volunteer outfit called Habitat for Humanity.

And there are people in our own community who have turned their businesses into means to the end of serving Christ, and people who have moved their lives into the inner city. And there are people who use their vacation time to build and rebuild homes, schools, and churches. There are people who are saying this is the year to buy less stuff for Christmas and invest more in people's lives. People in all sorts of ways are living their lives in ways that you wouldn't expect, doing what they do because this story has gotten a hold of them and won't let go. The saying must be true, "You shall know the Truth and the Truth shall make you weird."

This is not just a story with curveballs in it. This is a story that itself is a curveball. Any story with death and resurrection is a story of surprise and wonder. Maybe we ought to be looking for a few more curveballs. That's where the gospel is.

The gospel is in the upside down, the inside out. It's when there's stuff in your life that only makes sense if Jesus is raised from the dead. That's gospel living.

It seems that for all sorts of people whose encounter with Jesus and journey with Jesus reorders their lives, their prayer is that of Zechariah the moment he found his voice: "Blessed be the Lord God of Israel. For he has visited and redeemed his people." Thanks be to God.