

## “Walking the Circle”

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Bradley Hills Presbyterian Church

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Luke 1: 5-15

During Advent, all around us and outside the church we engage in shopping, buying, wrapping, writing and mailing presents and cards. We decorate our homes and trees and attend parties. We cook, host, travel and reunite. It's a very hectic time of year. It's why December is the busiest month for therapists. It's why some people have used the word “Stressmas” to describe the holiday that is approaching. And in all the busyness we can feel overwhelmed, caught in the cycle of expectation and the circle of routine. The pressure to do things as they have always been done or as others do them may leave you feeling like there is nothing to look forward to. But looking forward is the whole point of Advent.

One challenge at Advent and Christmas is that many of the traditions of the season are ones we all have participated in before, that's a great thing, unless we take them for granted. Even before Galileo, Copernicus and others determined that the earth moved round and round and around the sun, humans have long experienced time as circular and cyclical. Each year comes with many of the same activities as the last. The sun comes up in the morning. To quote a Grinch, “Christmas arrives each year whether we like it or not.” So we can either let it be the same old thing, or we can allow Advent lead us to a fresh experience of God's grace through hope. We can do that by dreaming big, praying intently and opening our hearts to wonders of God's grace that we experience on our walk with God. For Advent is a time to renew your belief that with God anything is possible.

Just as Advent leads us to Christmas, this theme of longing, dreaming and praying for something new was real for the generation that led to the birth of Jesus. Luke chapter 1 tells us the story of Elizabeth and Zechariah. In their story, which is also often told the first Sunday of Advent, we hear of two older people who longed for new life. But as the years passed for parenthood the dream began to fade. Yet the hope still existed, and their prayers continued to be lifted up.

Zechariah was a priest and so accustomed to lifting up prayers. One day he was invited to burn incense in the temple. The burning of incense had deep roots in the Hebrew tradition for purification, respect and spiritual connection since God told Moses to burn incense around the Ark of the Covenant. The rising smoke signified a lifting up of an offering to the Lord. In the psalms we read that King David

asked that his prayer “be like incense rising to the Lord.” Zechariah burned incense in the temple as the people all around were praying. Each morning and evening in the temple lambs were sacrificed to God and so incense was burned so that those burnt offerings of lamb would be lifted up encircled in a sweet swell. Similarly, people prayed at the temple so their prayers would be lifted up in the presence of the holy. They hoped their prayers would be lifted up with the other offerings and be heard by God. It was an opportunity to magnify their prayers – encircled in the presence of the Holy Spirit.

Zechariah was likely praying himself that day as he did his duty in the temple. An Angel startled him out of his mindset. And then the Angel said to Zechariah, “Your prayer has been heard. You will have a son and name him John.” That was John the Baptist. Zechariah might not have fully believed in his own prayer but lifted up a prayer to have a child anyway. We might be here today praying for something we aren’t convinced is possible but we pray anyway. We do so because something in our faith tells us that what seems impossible to us is possible for and with God. That is the hope of Advent. That each new Christmas, each new year, each time we pray, we connect with the one whose grace can save us when we cannot save ourselves.

As the people standing outside as Zechariah burned the incense circled the temple, that tradition that began as people circled the spot where the ark used to be. The Ark of the Covenant had a proud history of circling. You may recall the famous battle of Jericho in 1400b.c., the Israelites were returning from slavery to Canaan and they had to take Jericho. That did not seem possible. But God gave Joshua a plan. For six days the Israelites carried the Ark in a circle around the city. Then on the 7<sup>th</sup> day they encircled the city seven times, blew their ram horns, shouted and the walls would fall down. This crazy plan worked and the walls came tumbling down. What seemed impossible for humanity was possible for God.

For the Israelites, the tradition of connecting with God in a circle was powerful. Zechariah’s generation celebrated the story of Honi, a first century B.C. sage who lived outside the walls of Jerusalem.<sup>[i]</sup> One summer there was a great drought. The ground and livestock were dying and the people were suffering. Honi lifted up a prayer for rain in a particular way. He took a six foot staff and turned 360 degrees and with his staff made a circle in the dust. Then he knelt in the circle, raised his hands and prayed “Lord, I swear before your name that I will not move from this circle until you have showed mercy to your children.” And then great rain fell, soothed the parched land, saved the people and created for Honi a reputation as one who dreamed something new and prayed boldly to God. The Sanhedrin criticized Honi but he was a hero because through him God saved a

generation that the religious leaders could not. What was impossible for us was possible for God.

Mark Batterson of the highly successful National Community Church here in D.C. tells the story of the founding of the church.<sup>[ii]</sup> He had a dream for his faith community and decided to follow Honi's example by making a prayer circle around the Capitol Hill area. He walked a 4.7 mile circle lifting up to God a prayer for a vibrant community of faith in D.C. They had nothing when they started but Batterson attributes their rapid growth to the intentionality of his prayer. For what seemed impossible to us is possible with God.

Our congregation built its vision from a circle. The vision for Washington Heights Presbyterian Church, the forerunner of Bradley Hills, began with what was called the Steadfast Prayer Circle, a group of women who met a century ago to pray together and to lift each other up. Such a circle continues here today bringing a fresh inspiration to our members.

This morning our community dedicates our labyrinth, a project that came out of our prayer circle. A labyrinth is a circular path that faithful people have walked all over the world to exhale the stress of life and to exit refreshed. I have found that to be the case when I walk labyrinths. And this morning we'll begin a new tradition of starting each new liturgical year walking the labyrinth as a community. Every time we enter the circle of the labyrinth we do so at the same entrance and walk the same path. Even though I enter the labyrinth on the same path each time, every time I walk a labyrinth I have a fresh experience of grace. I have walked the same labyrinth many times and each time is new if I allow it to be. We enter Christmas and indeed a new church year, the same way through Advent. Yet each path, this year's path, can be a new experience of grace.

The example of Zechariah, that sometimes God surprises us with grace; that our prayers can be answered, is the Advent hope for each of us. And so like Zechariah we can dream big, praying intently and then watching for what God does.

That is the way we got our labyrinth. Member Betty Hansen and others had been dreaming about a labyrinth here for many years. And literally encircled our campus looking for the perfect spot. With Kate Wise's prayers and leadership and the involvement and gifts of many, what was a prayer 10 years ago, that God might bring us a labyrinth, is a reality. I have heard Kate lift up the amazing way in which God's light shown down on the right spot for our labyrinth and how so many stepped up to make it possible. We watched in awe of what is possible as gifts came in for and through God.

Batterson would say if your payers are not big you have no need for divine intervention.<sup>[iii]</sup> This is a season to dream and pray big. As a church we have financial headwinds that we didn't have more than 5 years ago with a challenging economy, our having to pay the principle back on a loan, window and roof issues and losing parking income from Suburban hospital. And yet you as a congregation have dreamed big for this church and what is possible through God and every pledge and contribution is important. Thank you. I understand that 61 families thus far have increase their pledge by 10% or more compared to last year. That is a remarkable statistic. I invite you each of you to be part of the dream at our church of being a church for inspires faith, heals hearts, educates children and changes lives.

The stories of Zechariah, of Joshua, of Honi, of our congregation's founding, and of our congregation's latest adventure we dedicate today, all came from dreams and prayers in a circle. Because in a circle we face each other and are surrounded by God's love. These dreams occurred when faithful people stayed in prayer, followed God, acted boldly and watched what God could accomplish through them. Because nothing is too big a dream or prayer for God.

I spent time this week with a man who recently lost his best friend and life partner. He was crushed. And he said the only way he is able to go forward is because he knows that what is impossible for us, is possible for God. That if there is any hope that he will be reunited with the one he misses so much in the life to come; that hope must be made possible by God's sovereign grace. At Advent we affirm the incarnation of Christ and that Christ will come again. That death is not the end. Whatever it is that we long for; our deepest longing really is for relationship with the God who makes everything else possible.

Walter Brueggemann once said that "the fundamental question every human being must answer is 'Is there anything too wonderful for God?' If the answer is 'Yes, some things are too hard, impossible for God' then God is not God. We have not conceded radical freedom to God. We have determined to live in a closed universe where things are stable, reliable, and hopeless. If, on the other hand, the answer is 'No, nothing is impossible for God,' this is an answer that accepts God's freedom, and then our self and our world are fully entrusted to God."

The kind of dynamic, prayerful communication that brought down walls and rain and led an angel to share news of a miraculous birth, can prepare you for the miraculous birth at Christmas, and for a spiritual rebirth in your own walk with God. So let us walk this Advent near a circle of light, together in a circle of the

Lord's Supper, in the presence of a circle of God's endless love. May it be so.  
Amen.

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- <sup>[i]</sup> Mark Batterson. *Be a Circle Maker*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2011. P. 12.  
<sup>[ii]</sup> Mark Batterson. *Be a Circle Maker*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. 2011. P. 25.  
<sup>[iii]</sup> Ibid.