

Do you ever have a tough time getting to where you are going? Sometimes we run into the logjams of life and our nice neat journey that we have at least planned out in our mind gets interrupted.

About ten years ago, I was going through a typical Wednesday in the season of Lent. I was serving a church that had worship on Wednesday Evenings. I spent the morning reflecting and working on the sermon I would preach that evening. I had a meeting. Then, I went off to play basketball at noon at the YMCA.

I have told you in the past how I love to play basketball. I am not that good, but I love to play. I had been going to play at the Y over the noon hour for quite some time.

Playing basketball for me at that time was about running a little, sweating a little. I would make a few baskets. I would make a few passes so others could make baskets. Then I would head back to work. It was a good routine.

On this day, I played the first game. Our team lost. We started the second game and things were going well. We had jumped out to a good sized lead. Then it happened. An errant ball came my way and my finger was jammed.

It hurt so bad. When I finally looked at it, it was bent in a horrible, grotesque kind of way and I knew I needed to get to the emergency room. So I went, in pain, hoping that this emergency room visit would go quick so I could get back to work.

When a doctor finally came to see me, shots were given to me. X-rays were taken. Then the emergency room doctor tried to pull my finger back into place. He pulled and he pulled and he cranked and he cranked and I almost came off the gurney it hurt so bad.

Finally he stopped and looked at me and said, "I can't do it. If I keep pulling so hard, I am afraid I will break your hand." I was relieved that he had stopped pulling, but then I asked, "Is there anyone here who can fix it?"

He found an orthopedic doctor who came and looked at the x-ray. He talked to the ER doctor. He looked at the x-ray and said, "I think your bone is twisted." So he grabbed a hold of my hand, he twisted and he pushed and he moved and he pulled and viola, my bone went back into position.

Two hours after I arrived I was finally ready to go. My journey to get back to work and continue my day took quite a delay. But that is the way it is with journeys sometimes. We run into delays. We run into logjams. We get sidetracked. We get confused. Every-once-in-a-while we need to stop and take stock of where we are and where we are going.

During this season of Advent, we are beginning a new sermon series. It is called *Looking for Hope*. We are going to examine several of the people of the Christmas story to try and see where they were looking for hope and where they eventually discovered hope along the way. Maybe, if we can look closely at them and how they received hope, it can help us in our search.

Today, we look at Zachariah. Zachariah is an elderly priest, who has been married to Elizabeth. They have not had any children. They have prayed for children, but it hasn't happened. In that day and age, children meant security, children meant hope, children meant you had a future. But for whatever reason, Elizabeth wasn't able to have children. And they had grown older. Most likely past the age of being able to give birth. And they had to deal with their disappointment.

How do you deal with disappointment? How do you deal with circumstances that don't turn out the way you would like them to turn out? Do you become angry? Do you become bitter? Do you through yourself into something else?

Zachariah threw himself into his work and into faithfulness at work.

I know a lot of people who throw themselves into work. There are a lot of people in this room even who are working so hard, life has become out of balance for you. My question is what is it getting for you? Is it bringing fulfillment?

I am sure that it is bringing many rewards to you and to your family. But is it bringing fulfillment to your life?

Don't get me wrong, I am not against work. I would like to think that I work hard. I also know though the danger of work for me. I can work so much and so hard that it doesn't take long before life becomes out of balance for me. And if I am not careful, when that happens, all of the relationships of my life begin to suffer. The relationship I have with friends suffers. The relationship I have with my wife suffers. The relationship I have with my children suffers. Even the relationship I have with God suffers, when I don't take care of myself.

One of the biggest signs of this being out of balance is that I am not very good at seeing the signs of God's presence around me.

As Zachariah does his thing as a priest. An angel comes to say, "Your prayer has been heard. God is going to bring a child to you and your wife Elizabeth. And this child is going to be remarkable. He will turn people to God and announce the presence of the Messiah."

And instead of being delighted, Zachariah is afraid, surprised and filled with disbelief. "Yea, right. We are going to have a baby. Do you know how old we are? Why didn't you do this when we prayed for it a decade or so ago?"

The angel just looks at Zachariah and says, "It will happen. Believe me. And you will be able to speak again, when it all comes to pass."

For me, this story reminds me that God does see us. God does care about us. God is willing to speak with us and bring us hope, where ever we are, even if that is at work. But it is not the work that saves us. It is in being faithful that we discover God cares and is willing to provide for us.

I want to close today by telling you a story. An old monk sat by the side of the road. With his eyes closed and his legs crossed and his hands folded in his lap, he sat. In deep meditation he sat.

Suddenly his meditation was interrupted by the harsh demanding voice of a samurai warrior. "Old man! Teach me about heaven and hell!"

At first, as though he had not heard, there was no perceptible response from the monk. But gradually he began to open his eyes, the faintest hint of a smile playing around the corners of his mouth as the samurai stood there, waiting impatiently, growing more and more agitated with each passing second.

"You wish to know the secrets of heaven and hell?" replied the monk at last. "You who are so unkempt. You whose hands and feet are covered with dirt. You whose hair is uncombed, whose breath is foul, whose sword is all rusty and neglected. You who are ugly and whose mother dresses you funny. You would ask me of heaven and hell?"

The samurai uttered a vile curse. He drew his sword and raised it high above his head. His face turned to crimson, and the veins on his neck stood out in bold relief as he prepared to sever the monk's head from its shoulders.

"That is hell," said the old monk gently, just as the sword began its descent.

In that fraction of a second, the samurai was overcome with amazement, awe; compassion and love for the gentle being who had dared to risk his very life to give him such a teaching. He stopped his sword in mid-flight and his eyes filled with grateful tears.

"And that," said the monk, "is heaven."

(Pause)

We do not earn God's love through strength, power, might or work. We receive God's love and hope through faith.

May we look to God this advent season, and discover the hope we yearn for.

Amen