



WESTMINSTER  
PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

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# Initiative and Response

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First of all, I need to extend my most heartfelt thanks to everyone at Westminster for the gift of this summer's sabbatical. It was great to get some time of rest, and to spend time with Sarah getting to know the boys during the daylight hours, it was a remarkably lovely time. I'm blown away by the generosity of this congregation. Truly, thank you from the bottom of my heart!

One of the things I did while I was away this summer was to spend time at the New Wilmington Mission Conference. Some of my friends from the Bridge and I went there to lead worship for the high school program, but every once in a while, we would sneak out and see what was going on at other parts of the conference. One night we went to the big meeting down in the auditorium. Now, there is a usual and predictable pattern to these types of gatherings. The worship band will play a few up tempo songs, there will be some prayers and announcements, and the speaker will be introduced. While the speaker is wrapping up, the band will play light, moody music in the back, and then we all join together in one last song of praise.

I don't mean to throw this particular speaker under the bus; I've seen this in lots of places. However, one night the speaker definitely broke the expected pattern. There were a few up-tempo songs. The expected prayers and announcements followed. Then the speaker started singing. It was a bit awkward. I've started sermons a lot of ways but I've never thought to just start singing. And then she spoke, and spoke, and spoke, and spoke, and then said "in conclusion" and spoke, and spoke and spoke. Finally, the band came up on stage to start playing the last song, and she kept singing with them. As they played the last chorus, she invited them to keep singing it over and over and over again. We watched the band on stage exchange some

awkward glances, at which point I leaned over to my friends and whispered “I think we’re witnessing a hostile takeover!”

In our text this morning, Jesus is kind of in the middle of his own hostile takeover. Is this his congregation? It was probably not. This story comes in a sequence in Luke where it is clear that Jesus is journeying to Jerusalem, and this is clearly set apart as a pit stop along the way. Jesus, at this point, would have been a fairly popular itinerant rabbi, so he was likely invited in to preach. But as he’s speaking, his eyes fall upon a woman.

What I find interesting about this text is that there is no place where the woman asks to be healed. Usually you’ll hear something like “Son of David, have mercy on me!” or “If you are able, heal my son!” or something like that. But this woman doesn’t come forward. She doesn’t beg. She doesn’t say a word. All we really know about her is that she is suffering from some sort of “spirit of weakness.” There’s some debate as to whether this is an actual possession by a demon, or whether that’s just a euphemism for a disability. Either way, what Luke wants us to know is that this is a story of healing.

One of the details we might miss here is that this woman has been suffering for 18 years. That’s 18 years of hearing God say no. Obviously, we don’t know much about those 18 years, and what may or may not have happened. But if she’s been asking God for help, she’s been getting a “no” for 18 years! I bet it would have been easy to turn away from God. It would have been easy to just abandon the whole enterprise. And maybe she did, perhaps this was the first time she had shown up in the synagogue in a while. But I don’t get that impression from the text. I get the impression that she had a habit of showing up.

In any healing story, we want to pay attention to what Jesus does, and what the crowd's reaction is. In this story in particular, Jesus is driving all the action. Jesus lays his hands on the woman. Jesus speaks over her. Jesus heals her. The woman, for her part, has placed herself in a position for Jesus to act. All we can say about her in this story is that she put herself where she needed to be. She showed up, and let Jesus work.

What are the responses of those around? The woman, as soon as she is healed, starts giving glory to God. This seems like the right reaction to a miraculous healing, no? She knows who has done the work, and who deserves the credit.

Then we turn our attention to the leader of the synagogue. It would be easy to throw this guy under the bus. He's an easy target. His response to this miraculous healing right in front of him is to turn everybody back to the rules. "There are six days to do work, come and be healed on those days." Maybe we don't understand this line of thinking, but the truth is that for this leader's entire life, this is how he brought God glory. It was through the ritual and pattern of life. It's predicable. Now, all of a sudden Jesus shows up with this hostile takeover, and the leader is just trying to get back to normal.

What about the crowd? What's interesting is that Jesus and the synagogue leader are having a disagreement, but they're directing their responses to the audience. The leader tells them to come on the six days lined up for work, and Jesus calls them all hypocrites. So we can imagine that there is a split crowd here. Some would likely have been glorifying God with the woman; others would have been

indignant right along with the synagogue leader. I wonder if we were in the crowd that day, what side would you be on?

This is a story about initiative and response. In this story, Christ is the one driving all the action. So one of the questions a text like this raises for us is “Where do you see Christ working in your own life?” One of the unfortunate things a text like this can do for us though is to allow us to assume that Christ only works in the big and miraculous things. I’m sure in a room like this, there are folks who have big miraculous stories of God’s action in their lives, and we should hear and celebrate those stories more. But what about the little things?

One of the things I missed this summer was our Vacation Bible School, where every day kids go through their “God Sightings,” little ways that they may have seen God at work in their world through the day. “I lifted up a rock and found a lady bug! Isn’t God awesome!” And on some level, that might seem really small. But on another level, it’s a beautiful thing, because these kids kind of instinctively know that God is very capable of moving in the little things as well as the large.

And yet sometimes, we can go through seasons where we can’t see or feel God moving at all. Truth is, God has a habit of leading his people into the waiting room. He sets his people free from slavery in Egypt, and leads them to the desert to say “I’ll be with you in 40 years.” David is anointed king, but Saul is still on the throne. It’s like God is saying “You’re my guy, but not quite yet...” Jesus is baptized and then the text says he is driven into the wilderness. So if God has a pattern of doing this for his people, surely there’s some value in the waiting room experience, isn’t there? If you find yourself in the waiting room, then just enjoy it as

much as you can! Clearly God is up to something, and perhaps God is at work even in those seasons where it feels like God is doing nothing at all.

One of the temptations I think we face when we have a hard time seeing Christ at work is assuming that he doesn't work, and that we're the only ones who can. There is a certain kind of spirituality that places us at the center of our own universe. That's what the people are going through in Isaiah. They are worshiping God, but they're doing it in their own ways, in ways that place themselves at the center. They are doing without wondering what it is that they are in fact, doing. But the presence of Christ is always there, always active, always moving in our lives. What we need to do is bring an awareness to the times God is acting, even and perhaps most especially, in the waiting room.

Does anyone remember a few months ago, the huge pile of dead Christmas trees on McMurray Road? It seemed like all the trees just found their way there, into a big heap of garbage. I drove by that heap every day for a couple of weeks and didn't think anything of it beyond "there's a pile of garbage." But one day we had one of those warm snaps in the middle of winter, I rode my bike to work. The *smell* of that pile of rotting Christmas trees was delightful! It was like Christmas came back for an encore! I had been driving past this glorious scent for weeks, and was completely unaware. I had my windows up. I had my radio on. I was unaware of the goodness in front of me.

I wonder how many times I do that with the action of Christ? I'm just blissfully unaware of the goodness of Christ in my life.



Once we carry this awareness however, I wonder how we respond? One choice is to dismiss it. I can't tell you how many people will come up to me and tell me what God is up to in their lives and start by saying "This is going to sound crazy, but..." No! If we believe in a big God who does big things, then it's not crazy. It's actually reality! If Jesus is working in your life, own it! Don't dismiss it!

Another choice is to try to claim it as our own work. If we're in that habit of putting ourselves at the center of our own spiritual lives, then we have a tendency to claim what God is doing in our own lives as our own. One of the questions Sarah and I asked each other throughout the summer is how exactly it was that I survived that last year of school. The twins were born during finals week! I was working full time here, sitting in full time Pittsburgh traffic, writing papers upon papers upon papers, and raising twins. Now I could have claimed that it was my own strength that got us through, but that would be a lie. Instead I just claim it for what it is. God gave us strength where none would normally be found. God got us through that completely and totally.

Perhaps the best choice is to simply delight in the action of God. In Isaiah, the prophet lays out a bunch of if/then statements. If you remove the yoke of oppression, if you give your food to the hungry, if you don't trample the Sabbath and the reward for all of these ifs? Then you will delight in God. If you do the things God enjoys, you will enjoy God. This sounds painfully simple, but also kind of hard to achieve in our day, doesn't it?

Over the summer I've been seeing a spiritual director. I told her I was having a hard time with the daily scripture readings I was doing, that I was approaching them too

academically. She told me to just stop reading the Bible for a while. What? Can we do that? Aren't we Christians? But her advice to me was to *savor* the time I had with my family. Savor what God was doing in and through these beautiful boys. Savor time with my wife. Take delight in all that God was up to. It's been a great exercise; it's really changed my perspective on things.

So here is my challenge to you my brothers and sisters. Recognize the way Christ is moving in your life. Take a notebook or a piece of paper and just jot down the places where you see Christ moving, whether it's miraculously big or seemingly insignificant. And if you find yourself in the waiting room, keep your eyes open. I wonder if the woman in the story knew that this day would be the last day of the 18 years? She probably did not. But she had put herself in a position to see God working in her life. She was aware.

With that new found awareness then, delight in God. Take a few moments this week to enjoy God in whatever way God speaks to you. Personally, I'll be spending as much time outside as I can before that Pittsburgh snow hits us again. Maybe you see God in art, or in music, or in spending time with friends or family. Whatever it is, make sure that you are intentional about it. Enjoying God does not happen frequently by accident. Actually block out some time on your calendar this week to enjoy God's goodness.

And then, come back here full of delight, ready to sing your praises to God!



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