



WEEK 1 – THE TEMPLE

CHECK - IN

How are you? Where have you seen God working in your life in the last week? And... it's that time of year! What do you want for Christmas? Your two front teeth? A hippopotamus? An Official Red Ryder Carbine-Action Two-Hundred-Shot Range Model Air Rifle? You? (That last one Mariah Carey). Santa's waiting... Ready, go!

OPENING PRAYER

God-with-Us, help us to take the time this holiday season to slow down, recenter, and prepare for the gift of your Son.

INTRODUCTION

Today marks the first Sunday of Advent, the 4 weeks that lead up to the celebration of the birth of Christ at Christmas. And historically, Christians have used this season of Advent to reset... to recenter... to slow down and prepare our hearts to once again welcome Christ into

our lives. But here's the problem. For most of us, rather than slow down this time of year, our lives kick into the highest possible gear, and we find ourselves going 1000 mph, barreling toward Christmas with reckless abandon. And so, for this series, we're going to take a slower walk through Advent, seeking to find points on the journey where the space between our spirit and God's becomes *thin*.

Setup Question: A fun one to start... what's the worst traffic you've ever been in? Atlanta? Boston? Old Troy Road here in town when the city decides we need the 87th traffic light on that stretch? Discuss!

SERIES SETUP

We like to say life is a journey, and it's a good metaphor. However, our life journey often feels like rush hour LA traffic, either at a dead stop on the freeway with everyone laying on the horn, or going 80 mph bumper to bumper just trying to get everything done. But here's the thing... in order to rest and reset, we need more than just pulling off at a rest stop to use the bathroom and load back up on Slim Jims. On our life journeys, there's one key element that is absolutely necessary, if we are serious about recentering. We need to intentionally create...

THIN SPACES

Usually attributed to Celtic Christianity, *thin spaces*, are times, locations, experiences, where the veil between Heaven and Earth gets

a little thin, where the divine and the human intersect, where we are keenly aware of God's presence. And it is these thin spaces that help us balance our journey of life. They are the rest stops along the road that give us a chance to breathe, to break from the chaos, to connect with the Spirit and Presence of God, and this time of year, to prepare our hearts for the celebration of Christmas.

Question 1: How do you feel about your pace this time of year? Is it motoring out of control? Or do you have a good grasp on the wheel, taking a leisurely roll through the holidays? What drives the pace... that is, what is the cause of the busy-ness?

THE SCRIPTURE & THE SPACE

Now, for this series, we're going to use another word for "journey"... that is, a pilgrimage. A pilgrimage is a journey that has a definite and holy destination, which is perfect for our context this month. Our definite and holy destination is Christmas and the manger. And along the way, we're going stop at a number of holy sites, both holy sites in the story of Jesus's birth in the Bible, and their corresponding holy sites in our lives. At every stop, we'll witness how heaven touched earth in these thin spaces, and then discover how to create those thin spaces in our lives. So, what is our first *thin space*?

Well, the most complete story of Jesus's birth in the Bible is in Luke, So, let's start where he starts. Which is interesting, because he doesn't start with Mary or Joseph or Bethlehem or Shepherds. He starts with a different family and a different miraculous birth. So,

today, we begin with Zechariah and Elizabeth, in the city of Jerusalem, and a pretty obvious location where Zechariah encountered a thin space. Here's what you need to know. Zechariah was a priest, and he and his wife Elizabeth had no kids, because, as the Bible puts it, "they were getting on in years." (v7, NRSV) Let's take a look at the first thin space on our Advent Pilgrimage.

Read Luke, chapter 1, verse 8 through 10.

The first stop on our Advent pilgrimage is here in Jerusalem with Zechariah in...

THE TEMPLE

There are portions of the Temple that existed in Zechariah's day still standing and present in Jerusalem. And though much of the Temple Mount is now a Muslim mosque and a shrine called the Dome of the Rock, it still sits as a holy site for Jews and Christians, as well. (Take a moment to look through the Temple pictures from Pastor Mike's pilgrimage to the Holy Land.)

Zechariah was a priest, and priests had lots of duties around the temple: they prayed, they taught, they cleaned, they kept order, they offered sacrifices. And because there were many of them, and they didn't have Planning Center to schedule them. They cast lots, (think, drew straws,) to see who got to go into the most inner court, the Holy of Holies, to burn incense. Now, Zechariah had gone to the temple

many times, maybe even into this Holy of Holies more than once. It was a natural, built-in thin space in his life. And yet, none of those other times made it into the Bible. You'd think he'd have holy moments, holy encounters all the time there, but this one stood out for a reason... let's look at why...

Read Luke, chapter 1, verse 11 through 14.

In the temple, Zechariah has an encounter with an angel... talk about a thin-space where the veil between heaven and Earth disappears. It doesn't get more thin, than an angelic appearance, bringing news like this.

Question 2: Consider this passage of Scripture. How would you have felt were you Zechariah? Would you have been more freaked out by the angelic visit or his message? Or, would you have taken both in stride and walked out like it was Christmas morning?

REFLECTION

While Zechariah is in the Temple, specifically the innermost sanctuary, he has an experience where the veil between heaven and earth becomes remarkably thin. And, how does he respond? Verse 12 says, "Zechariah was shaken and overwhelmed with fear." (NLT) Ya think? But the more we consider the situation, the more we might ask the question... should he have been? Should Zechariah have been surprised that he had a thin-space moment in a place where thin-space moments *should* happen? Probably not. One would think

Zechariah would have gone to the Temple expecting it to be a thin-space. And yet he was surprised. And as we continue reading the chapter, it doesn't get better. After this pronouncement, Zechariah questions the angel. He's having this thin-space moment, IN the Holy of Holies, talking to an angel, and he questions the message! He says, (in the Pastor Mike Paraphrase Edition of the Bible,) "Dude, I'm old... and, I'd never say this in front of her, but my wife is no spring chicken either. You sure?" And the angel's response is priceless, (again in the PMPE,) "Dude, I'm Gabriel... I stand in the presence of God every day, He's the one who sent me... and you're questioning it? K, until the baby's born, jinx, you can't speak." And sure enough, Zach leaves the Temple mute. The other priests wondered what took so long, so he starts playing charades, and they figure out he had a vision. And sure enough, Zach goes home, and Liz becomes pregnant.

It just seems surprising that he's surprised. Where else would you expect to have a thin space moment on your life journey than the Temple? But it begs the question, are we any better? Do we come to worship expecting to have holy moments? Do we enter into "the temple" with our hearts open, expecting thin-space experiences? We define worship as "encountering the presence of God," but do we really think it could happen? Most of us would probably react like Zechariah if a truly thin space moment occurred in worship. We'd freak out a little and question if it was just a bad reaction to the Thanksgiving leftovers. We call ourselves Christians. We say we believe in miracles. We pray to a God we can't see, touch, taste,

smell, or hear. And yet, we come to church and would be surprised if we had a thin-space moment.

This month will be crazy busy. Christmas is 25 days away. (Don't panic, deep breaths.) But if we're going to intentionally build thin spaces in our life in order to slow down, reset, and recenter to prepare for Christmas, what better place to start than the Temple? Come to worship. Start there. Make it a point to be in worship every Sunday and Christmas Eve (Eve). Because the other 6 days of the week will fly by, make this your built-in thin space. But more than that, come expecting to encounter the presence of God. Expect a thin space.

Question 3: Have you ever had a “thin space” moment in worship? Perhaps you felt the undeniable presence of God in a sacrament like Communion or Baptism? Maybe a particular song or sermon spoke to you? Share.

CLOSING

This week, to kick off Advent, your challenge is to make worship your built-in thin space... your handmade, rest stop on your life journey. But don't just attend. Enter in with anticipation. Come to worship with your heart open, with your mind expecting, with your soul ready to encounter the presence of God. Your worship space may not look like the Basilica in St. Louis or the Sistine Chapel. But the presence of God is there, and like it was for Zechariah, your worship space can be your temple, a holy space, where you feel the presence of God, where the veil between heaven and earth gets a little thin. If we're

going to slow down and recenter ourselves in the midst of the rush hour traffic of life, let today, the next three Sundays, and Christmas Eve (eve), be rest stops for you. If you just can't build it in any other time of the week, let your worship space be your Temple, a thin space on your pilgrimage. Let that hour on Sunday morning be a holy moment, that will prepare your heart for the celebration of the coming of Christ on Christmas. Come to worship... and expect to encounter the presence of God.

**Take some time to share prayer requests or celebrations
and close in prayer.**