

The Silent Prophet

December 21, 2014

Dr. Stephen D. McConnell

One of the many gifts I did not receive when God created me was the spiritual gift of shopping. I am not a shopper. It's not that I don't shop, I do. And I am happy to Christmas shop for my family and friends. But if there is any way of describing my approach to shopping it would be commando shopping. Special Forces shopping. My idea of shopping is get in – identify the target, purchase the target – then get out in as short a period of time as possible. Browsing is not in my shopping lexicon. If I am inside a mall for longer than a half hour my throat starts to close up.

All this came to mind when a few days ago I took my turn ringing the bell for the Salvation Army up the street in front of Publix. If you ever want a little view into the breadth of human nature – take a couple hours ringing the bell. It is a fascinating study. Now the truth is – people for the most part are extremely nice and very generous. Many, many people stop to make a donation. It may be due in part to the reindeer antlers I was wearing – but that is beside the point. But you can sort of divide the parade of people past the bucket into three groups. Those who are on a mission – commando shoppers. The commando shoppers kind of look straight ahead – and though there is a bell ringing, and though there is a man standing there with reindeer antlers on, and though there is a Merry Christmas greeting extended – they are on their way to achieve their goal. It's not to say they are not normally generous people – it's just that they have a job to do and they are doing it. Others, though in a hurry – somehow hear the bell, see the antlers and respond to the greeting. They may not necessarily put money in the bucket but they see what is happening and they engage it. There's also a third group and it's those talking on their phones. I could be out there with a ten piece band –

and nothing would distract them from the conversation or the text. All in all what you discover when you stand still is what happens around you – ringing the bell – people are on the move. Some with no time to stop. Some with little time to stop. Some not paying any attention at all. But we're all in a rush. The holiday rush.

A columnist from the San Francisco Chronicle once made this observation: Every morning in Africa, a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning a lion wakes up. It knows it must outrun the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. It doesn't matter then whether you are a lion or a gazelle; when the sun comes up, you'd better be running."

And run we do.

I don't know what your days are like, but if your days are like my days you get up in the morning and you spend a moment trying to orient yourself. Where am I? What day is it? What do I have to do? And not long into our conscious moments there comes this flood of things to do. There comes this presentation I have to make at work. There comes this call I have to make on a client. There comes this schedule of appointments I have to keep. There comes this house I have to clean, these children I have to chauffeur, this test I have to take. And off we go. And we go and we go. We run and we run faster. And maybe along the way we get a little rude. Or maybe to put it more gently we get a little intolerant of interruptions.

And they come. If you are like any normal human being into your daily life there comes a series of interruptions. Things you just weren't planning on. A phone call from someone you particularly don't want to talk to. An unexpected traffic jam. Your child calling from school sick. Your boss needs to meet with you. Your secretary needs to talk to you. Your car has a flat tire. Your plumber can all of a sudden come today and the next time he can come is in three years. There are these interruptions that can take us off the track of our running to get the things done that we need

to get done. And these interruptions can drive you crazy. Why? Because you're living the commando life!

And then comes that moment when there appears in your life someone who looks like an interruption. And you just don't have the time and then you realize who it is and you say to yourself, I am seeing this person as an interruption. And then you look again you see it is your spouse, your child, your best friend, your parent, and you say to yourself, What has my life become? Where have I gone? If this person is an interruption, if I am running so fast that this person is an interruption, then who am I?

Maybe that's a little of what the story of Jonah is about. We've been in the season of the prophets in our Advent journey – and Jonah is one of the prophets. But he's sort of the anti-prophet – because unlike all the other prophets Jonah hears the calling voice of God – and he runs the other way. Jonah hears the bell, sees the reindeer antlers and heads for the other entrance. He jumps on a ship and flees to Tarshish. The call is eastward to Nineveh, but Jonah heads westward to Tarshish. For lots of reasons I am sure – perhaps he doesn't like Gentiles. Perhaps he doesn't have the time. Perhaps he's on a commando mission to achieve something he needs to do. But bottom line – for Jonah the call of God came as interruption.

So here's the question, is God serving as an interruption in your life?

Jurgen Moltmann, the German theologian, says that when we think of Advent ... when we think of the coming of God ... we must not ever think in terms of an interruption. God doesn't work usually through interruptions. Interruptions imply a momentary pause and then back to the projects at hand. No, says Moltmann, when we think of the coming of God, when we think of advent, when we think of God intersecting our lives, we must think not in terms of interruption, but in terms of conversion. Advent is the season of conversion. He goes on to say – that the prophets were the converted ones. The prophets had been converted by the Spirit of God to believe that someday God would save his people. They never let go of this hopeful view of the future. God was not

interruption. No, despite the darkness, despite the times at hand, despite the hopelessness -- God was afoot to bring redemption. God didn't interrupt the regular program. God was the regular program.

So all this makes me wonder about our friend Joseph. Silent Joseph. Everyone in the Advent and Christmas stories has something to say except Joseph. No speeches, no oracles, not even a word in edgewise. Shepherds talk. The angels talk. The wise men talk. Mary talks. The only thing Joseph seems to do is dream. Joseph is a dreamer. And if there is anyone who seems to drive the Christmas story -- other than God himself -- it is Joseph. Joseph takes Mary as his wife. Joseph enrolls them to be counted in Bethlehem. Joseph names the baby Jesus. Joseph takes his family to Egypt. Joseph returns his family from Egypt. Joseph settles his family in Nazareth. Joseph drives the story. Without saying a word -- Joseph serves as the heroic protagonist. And perhaps the reason why Joseph drives the story is that somewhere along the way -- there had been a conversion. Somewhere along the way God was no longer for him an interruption -- because somewhere along the way Joseph came to see that the unfolding story of God had less to do with him -- and more to do with what God might be up to. What God might be up to. God wasn't interrupting the program, God was the program.

So the silent prophet sets himself to quietly divorce his wife-to-be for she has apparently crossed an immoral threshold. It seems the only thing he can do. Too disgraceful to give blessing to pregnancy outside of wedlock. Joseph must separate himself from the stain of Mary. But then there comes the dream. And it's the dream of an angel. Now I don't know much about dreams. I'm told that you and I dream all the time. Most of our dreams we're never aware of -- too buried in our subconscious, but there are some dreams that we remember, and I don't know about you -- I usually dream about something that has been on my mind. I usually dream about something that has been deep inside my soul. I usually dream about something that has occupied my heart. Dreams usually tell you who you are. So when Joseph dreams of an angel who wonders with him if God might be up to something in this morally suspect fiancée -- might the Scriptures be telling us something about

Joseph. That Joseph was a prophet who had room in his dreams for angels. And because Joseph has room in his dreams for angels – Joseph gets to be the one, at least in the Gospel of Matthew who drives the story. He took Mary as his wife. He named the child Jesus. And sure enough the dreams keep coming – the angels have found the one whose dreams are for them a welcome place. Go to Egypt, they say. Return to Palestine, they say. Settle in Nazareth, they say. They keep showing up in the silent prophet’s dreams – because it’s what he’s been thinking about all along. And he’s been thinking about it all along, because somewhere he’s been converted. He’s been converted to the proposition that God was up to something. That God was the regular program. That the call to take Mary. To travel to Bethlehem. To escape to Egypt. To settle in Nazareth – these were not interruptions of the regular program. These were the program.

Advent invites conversion. In these days the story takes a turn. We have made our way through the Old Testament story – the God of covenant encounters his people through creation, fallenness, brokenness, wilderness, settlement and exile – but now God enters the world. He comes in the flesh. And he will not serve as interruption. He comes as flesh to convert us. To invite us to follow him in Jesus. To follow him in Jesus. To make our plans around Jesus. To be disciples of Jesus. To make Jesus the regular program. To make our dreams welcome places for angels. And what that means is that you and I look different in January than we do in December. Are you ready for that? To look different in January than in December?

Kind of like our old friend, Scrooge. Remember Scrooge? It was a most traumatic Christmas Eve for the old miser. Traumatic, of course, because his dreams were unwelcome places for angels. But then what? Then comes the conversion – the visits of the Spirits – and then Scrooge wakes up – and Dickens ends the tale with these words:

(From that morning on) Scrooge was better than his word. He did it all, and infinitely more; and to Tiny Tim, who did NOT die, he was a second father. He became as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a man as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world. Some people laughed to see the alteration in him, but he let them laugh,

and little heeded them, for he was wise enough to know that nothing ever happened on this globe, for good, at which some people did not have their fill of laughter in the outset; and knowing that such as these would be blind anyway, he thought it quite as well that they should wrinkle up their eyes in grins, as having the malady in less attractive forms. His own heart laughed, and that was quite enough for him.

So maybe they laughed at the silent prophet who took Mary as his wife and did not know her until she had borne a son. Maybe they laughed every time that Joseph did something with his crazy dreams. But that's OK. That's what happens to prophets, of course, they get laughed at. It's what happens when you try to do some crazy good thing – you get laughed at. But that's OK – it's the laughter in your heart that matters.

So back to the question, is God serving for you as an interruption? Because you know, interruptions never get us to the laughter. Conversion gets us to the laughter. Conversion gets us to the dreams. Conversion gets us to the angels who have found a home in our dreams. Heavenly visitors there to tell us what part we have to play in the program. So that in the end it may be said of us, that we were as good a friend, as good a master, and as good a people as the good old City knew, or any other good old city, town, or borough in the good old world.