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SWINGING THE RACQUET LEFT HANDED

Luke 2:1-14

Do you know what is involved when the President travels anywhere? His entire motorcade is transported by Air Force transports, either C-17’s or C-5’s. The motorcade itself is a massive undertaking. It is not always exactly the same, but there is a basic pattern. It begins with a route car that checks out the route the motorcade will take making sure everything is fine. Then immediately prior to the motorcade there is a second car called the pilot car for the motorcade to follow. After that come sweepers, significant numbers of motorcycles and patrol cars clearing the way. Next comes the Lead car. Following that will be more than one Presidential Limousine. That is actually a heavily armored truck that looks like a limousine. It’s called the Beast. In addition to the ballistic armor it has a sealed cabin with an independent air supply, special night vision and infrared driving systems, a state of the art communication system, medical kit including a supply of the President’s blood type, and more. There are always decoy limos, and they constantly change places. Then comes a security vehicle packed with heavily armed agents. That is followed by an electronic countermeasures vehicle, then a control vehicle and a support vehicle. The control vehicle has military advisors in it, the support vehicle includes support personnel, including the President’s doctor. The intelligence division car follows those cars and then comes a Hazardous Materials van and the counter assault team vehicle. Finally there is a rear guard of police vehicles all covered by a helicopter overhead.

Do you think you’d notice if the President showed up? It would be impossible to miss, wouldn’t it? The thing is a massive and disruptive undertaking. It is impressive and powerful. If you are The way The way you’re going to get moved out of the way. It will over power you. But would you expect anything different for the most powerful man in the world? That being the case, what would you expect if the most powerful being in the universe arrived? It turns out to be shockingly different. Let’s look at Luke 2:1-14.

EXPOSITION

GOD MADE SEEMINGLY CURIOUS CHOICES.

The first curious aspect of this story is God’s strange decision to enter human history as a human infant. This is an act that it is impossible to wrap our heads around. Frequently in the Old Testament God is called the Almighty. Almighty means more powerful than anyone or anything else. Jeremiah 32:17 says, “Ah, Sovereign Lord, you have made the heavens and the earth by your great power and outstretched arm. Nothing is too hard for you.” Job 42:2 says, “I know that you can do all things. No purpose of yours can be thwarted.” Think about what those verses tell us. God is sovereign, meaning he rules. He rules over everything that exists.

Nothing is too hard for him, his purposes can’t be thwarted. There is no way we can completely comprehend that. Imagine that there is nothing you can’t do. Whatever you choose to do, you can do it. A couple of months back I was lifting weights. Laurie and I have dumbbells in our garage that we use to work out with. One day I had decided I needed to up the amount of weight I was using for my shoulder press. I was maybe a bit too optimistic. I struggled getting that weight up the first 2 reps, and on the third one I barely could move it up and found myself thinking, “Uh oh, I can’t do this.” I ended up just having to put the weights down. I didn’t have the power and strength to do what I intended.

Life for me is full of limitations, of occasions when things are too hard for me and I can’t do them. I was never the athlete I wanted to be because I just didn’t have the power and ability to do the things I wanted. Plumbing projects have been disasters because somehow I can’t seem to do the things I intended. I have an infinitely long list of things that I would have wanted to do, but just cannot do.

There is never a moment that God finds himself in that situation. Nothing is too hard for him. Nothing can stop him. If he can conceive of it, he can do it. It is not hard too understand why that would be. God created everything. It all depends upon him for existence. In the past I wrote a few novels. I created those stories. In them I created characters and situations. Because I created them I had total control over them. Not once did a character I created start doing something I didn’t want him or her to do. I never dealt with an unexpected situation that spun out of my control. I created it all, so I controlled it all. That’s how it is with God. Nothing is too hard for him because he created it all and it is all in his control.

Christ went from that to being a human infant. Is there anything farther from how God exists than that? I don’t think so, because while God is omnipotent, all powerful, a human baby is almost perfectly powerless. Our youngest grandchild, Hunter, is now 7 months old. He is not far from being an infant. As an infant he was helpless, almost completely powerless. Not only could he not stand up and walk, he couldn’t even sit up. He didn’t even have the power to hold his head up. He couldn’t control his own bodily functions. So imagine power being a spectrum. God went from the farthest extreme on one end to the farthest extreme on the other end. When we try to understand how it could possibly be that Almighty God became a helpless, powerless human infant, our minds hit a wall. I have no clue how that could have happened. It seems impossible. But remember, nothing is too hard for God, his purposes will stand. For him, there is no such thing as impossible. So he did what we cannot comprehend.

Almighty God, the omnipotent ruler of every atom that exists, chose purposely to become the weakest of beings, a human newborn. He subjected himself to humility and limitations that are inconceivable. This was the climactic moment when God would act decisively to rescue the condemned human race and to defeat his enemy in the spiritual war, and he did it by humbling himself to an unimaginable degree.

That becomes a theme in this story. Not only did God become a helpless baby, consider the people that baby was entrusted to. It was a random nobody, a woodworker in a backwater town in a fourth rate nation, and his teenaged wife. They had no fame, no power, no notoriety, no influence whatsoever. They were as anonymous as anyone could be. If you’re Almighty God, don’t you look for a family with some kind of power base, at least some influence in the world?

Here’s something else I noticed that is curious. It is where the baby was born and why he was born there. Verses 1-4 says, “In those days Caesar Augustus issued a decree that a census should be taken of the entire Roman world. This was the first census that took place while Quirinius was governor of Syria. And everyone went to their own town to register. So Joseph also went up from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea; to Bethlehem, the town of David, because he belonged to the house and line of David.” So the divine child was born in Bethlehem because Caesar said Joseph and Mary had to go there for the census. Wait, God is the ruler of all. He’s all powerful. Why did he have to do what Caesar said? Eternal, Almighty God submitted to a decree by a little human tinpot dictator. What power did Caesar have over the Creator God? None.

I know what it is like to get ordered around by a little dictator. Our 3 year old grandson likes to be in charge. So he tells me, “Bapaw, sit on the couch.” I sit down, but I’m not in the right spot apparently. He points to a different spot on the couch and says, “No, sit right here.” I sit in the designated spot, then he says, “I go talk to Nana, you stay here.” He will go off into a different room to talk to Laurie to cook up some plan, but I have to stay right there. I don’t do it because he has power over me and will force me to do it. Neither did Caesar have for even a nanosecond power over God, yet God followed his decree.

Then there is the “no room at the inn” part of the story. Things were different back in first century Judea. One part of the reason that there was no room at the inn was that there was no inn. Today in Bethlehem there is the Manger Square Hotel, the Shepherd Plaza Hotel and others, but back then they were a couple of millenia down the road. On caravan routes there typically were “inns” every 16-18 miles, but they were crude affairs. They were mostly just walled in enclosures with no roof. Travelers would sleep on the ground inside the enclosure, which was intended mainly as protection against bandits or predators. They were not places suitable for childbirth. Notice that Luke 2:7 says when the baby was born Mary “wrapped him in cloths and placed him in a manger, because there was no guest room available for them.”

That is an accurate translation. Joseph and Mary were likely staying with relatives or friends in Bethlehem because there was no other option. No Marriott, Hyatt, Hilton, not even a Motel 6. Homes for most people were very humble affairs, with one main room the entire family would sleep in. Many families would have another room much like a cave where they would keep their animals. Sometimes they might have an area screened off from the main room where married guests might stay. This was the “guest room.” That room was not available for the couple. So when it came time for the baby to be born, they were relegated to the animal pen. When Jesus was born they put him in a manger, which is a feeding trough.

When our first child, Carissa, was born, we didn’t have a lot of money. We lived in a small apartment with mostly cast off and hand me down furniture. We were humble nobodies of very humble means. But even in our situation our daughter was born in a hospital, attended to by doctors and nurses. She was put in a nice little bed in the hospital nursery, all very warm, cozy and clean. I don’t understand what happened with the heavenly travel office. How could they have failed to note the need for adequate facilities for the baby? Seems like a major dropped ball to me. Or it is one more aspect of the curious and weak appearing arrival of the child.

Finally at the end of this section of Scripture we see something that we’ve been expecting. Angels finally announce that this momentous thing was happening. God was entering history to accomplish an astounding, cosmically huge thing. At last this is going to get the kind of publicity that it deserves. Hey, a “great company” of angels showing up praising God is going to get some attention, right? Well, not really. Because the angels put on this great PR show for some shepherds who are tending sheep out in the countryside. I think I’d have had a meeting with the PR department when they came up with this plan. A handful of shepherds? Really? Was this because in that day shepherds were big time influencers? Everyone wanted to know what the shepherds were doing and what they thought about things, because they were true trendsetters, right? No, far from it. They were nobodies. Out in the fields they didn’t influence anyone that didn’t produce wool. They had little contact with other people. To make matters worse, they didn’t have an especially great reputation with the elites of their society. No questions were settled by asking, “What do the shepherds think about this?” Once again, this was a mystifying choice. If you’re going to go to the trouble of having angels make this kind of dramatic appearance and announcement, wouldn’t you do it in a situation and to people that can make a difference?

The king of kings arrives, but there is no motorcade, no impressive display of power. The picture this story makes up is one of anonymity, powerlessness, weakness, losing. It is the farthest thing from a tale of power and glory and awesome, world changing events.

GOD DISPLAYED TREMENDOUS POWER

Those unusual choices made by God that seem surprisingly weak, are one side of a coin. The other side of the coin is the exact opposite, because that side displays God’s great power. For instance, start with the manner of the pregnancy and birth of the baby in this story. Luke 1:26-39 tells us the story we all know, that this was a one of a kind birth, an impossible event.

One of Wesley’s favorite toys is a penguin that he calls Pengie. It can be a very annoying toy. That’s because its unique feature is that it repeats everything you say to it. Wesley loves to make weird noises to it and make it repeat them. He also likes to set it on the piano, then bang on the keys and listen as Pengie repeats the “tune.” Pengie cannot speak on its own. It has no such ability. It can only record sounds and play back the recording. All it can do is play back whatever is said to it or whatever sounds it picks up. It absolutely must be stimulated by some sound for it to make noise. If Pengie suddenly struck up a conversation all on his own it would be freaky. It would be impossible because he doesn’t have that capability. I share this because that is paralleled by the process of pregnancy and birth. There is something that absolutely has to happen to initiate a pregnancy. There is exactly zero possibility of a self-initiating pregnancy.

Yet Luke informed us in chapter 1 that Mary’s pregnancy began without the required initiating function! Yeah, right. Sounds like a fairy tale to me. How many times in the history of the human race has that happened? Well, that would be once. This is a story too preposterous to believe. No one believed it when Mary trotted it out so long ago. It would literally be unbelievable, except for one thing. Nothing is too hard for God. If God had the ability to create a universe out of nothing, and at one point to make a fully grown human being out of thin air, it doesn’t seem creating an embryo in the uterus of a young woman would be all that difficult. It would certainly be, if you’ll excuse the term, conceivable. And it would be an evidence of the great, unlimited, creative power of God. Let’s be clear. God has the power to create life where there had been no life. That is power that exists nowhere else.

A second reminder of God’s power, paradoxically, can be seen in the matter of the census. We saw how amazing it is that God operated according to the dictates of Caesar. That seems surprisingly weak. But a little more thought gives us a rather different perspective. Micah 5:2 says, “But you, Bethlehem Ephrathah, though you are small among the clans of Judah, out of you will come for me one who will be ruler over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient times.” This was a prophecy that this child, the Savior, the King of Kings, would be born in the little town of Bethlehem. Micah made that prophecy in the 8th century B. C. 700 years before Christ was born. But Joseph and Mary didn’t live in Bethlehem. They lived in Nazareth. So God maneuvered Caesar to order a census as a way of getting the young couple to Bethlehem so that Jesus’ birth there would fulfill a prophecy more than 700 years old. What looked like weakness actually turned out to be an act of incredible power. The great superpower of that day proved to be merely a tool of Almighty God.

The most amazing evidence of God’s power is in what all of this produced. There was a young, powerless, utterly unknown teenage woman, married to a powerless, blue collar worker. They were a part of a weak, oppressed people group ruled by a great superpower. The announcement of the birth of their son was made to a group of nameless, unimportant shepherds. The son born that night would himself become a woodworker. Then he began traveling around preaching. He called a bunch of utter no-names to be his inner circle, fishermen and common people and much worse. In what would appear to be the ultimate act of weakness, that Son would finally be executed by the ruling power. It is a tale of sadness and defeat.

Except for one, really enormous thing. That apparent defeat was the biggest victory that has ever or will ever happen throughout history. Somehow these seemingly weak choices would be woven together into the rescue of the human race. What seemed like an unimportant, losing effort that was steeped in futility and anonymity, changed the entire world. That “weak” plan proved infinitely greater than the great superpower of the day, and it is continuing to change the entire world right up to this present moment. What seemed the greatest loss in human history turned out to be the most powerful, glorious victory that will ever happen.

Yesterday the Minnesota Vikings played an NFL game against the Indianapolis Colts. The Vikings were heavily favored. They are the better team. Somehow, improbably, in the first half they got blown out. At halftime they were losing 33-0! Game over. They had to play the second half, but there was no coming back from that. Except there was. Minnesota somehow tied that game up, then won on vertices 39-36. It has never happened before. It was the biggest comeback in NFL history. And God’s victory in Christ was literally infinitely greater and more astounding, and cosmically more important than that.

IMPLICATIONS

GOD’S WAYS ARE NOT OUR WAYS

In 1 Corinthians 1:26-28 Paul wrote, “God chose the foolish things of the world to shame the wise; God chose the weak things of the world to shame the strong; God chose the lowly things of this world and the despised things, and the things that are not, to nullify the things that are.” Human beings don’t choose the foolish, the weak, the lowly, the despised things, the things that seem to count for nothing. We choose the smart, the strong, the celebrities, the impressive, the beautiful, the powerful, the somebodies to promote our agenda. Suppose you were a major corporation about to launch an ad campaign for a big new product. Who would you look for to be your spokesperson? Would you look for a migrant farm worker who can barely speak English, or for some Hollywood star? I don’t even need to ask. God did the equivalent of picking the migrant farm worker.

None of what God did is the way we would do it. We see that in this story in multiple ways. We can see that same theme repeatedly in other places in the Bible. That is a crucial truth for us to remember, and not just remember, but actually live by. Why would God choose Jacob, who was an unscrupulous con man for much of his life, to be one of the patriarchs of the chosen people? You really want a guy who’d scam his own brother and his father to be one of the heroes of your people? Yet God did just that. God does things in ways we just wouldn’t do them. Why would God let one of the best human beings on the planet, Job, go through unmitigated misery as a reward for his faithfulness? Yet that is precisely what happened. Why would Jesus Christ pick guys like Matthew and Zaccheus to be followers, even part of his inner circle, when they were some of the most hated people in their culture? That seems like a surefire way to get people to reject your whole movement. God has his own ways of doing things, and they are ways we just won’t understand at times.

There are going to be occasions in all of our lives when we have no idea why God is allowing things to happen the way they are, because they seem hard, even grievous. It is easy to question, doubt when that occurs. How am I supposed to trust God when he allows incomprehensible events in my life? That’s when we need to remember that God operates in ways we just don’t comprehend. As in the case of Jesus, there will be times when we eventually gain some understanding of what God was doing and why. But there will be other times when we simply have no clue. What we have is faith and the knowledge that God is good, he loves us, he seeks our good, and he is doing something we may never understand here. It is not because he lacks power.

Our youngest granddaughter, Bria, is a study in extremes. Much of the time she seems like that happiest, cutest child one could ever imagine. But there are also times when you begin to wonder if she has been possessed by a demon, if her head is going to spin 360 degrees. It is almost shocking how fierce her screaming can be. One of those occasions can be meal times. She is formerly a great eater, but right now meal times have become challenging. There is one food that can almost always be guaranteed to pacify her. Doughnuts. I wonder where that came from? The problem is, a steady diet of doughnuts and little else is not exactly the road to health. So these events happen where she sees the doughnut over on the counter, she wants it, and it is obviously available, but her parents keep it from her. To her, that seems like nothing but cruelty. Why would those who are supposed to love her keep from her the one thing she wants to eat? They must be just cruel. Except they are not. They are trying to love her. They know things that she does not know and are doing what is best for her.

Some of the things that happened when God executed his plan to rescue humanity are curious, mysterious, maybe don’t make sense to us. The same is true of many events in our lives. But we must remember that God knows things we don’t know, and he is working for our good even when it is totally confusing to us. What we must remember from this story is that when it feels like everything has spun out of control, it’s not true. God has all the power he will ever need to accomplish his purposes. He showed in these events that his winning can look for all the world like losing, but he is the Almighty God, and he is winning. So we must keep our confidence in him, no matter what happens.

It is important for us to remember these truths when God’s working seems weak in this world. Sometimes we might look at our little church, for instance, and think it seems utterly insignificant. But we must always remember what this story is about. It is about Jesus being Emmanuel, God with us. In his book, *The Holy Wild*, Mark Buchanan wrote about the church, “Anyone can do what we do. Most, in fact, do it better. They have bigger budgets, shrewder marketing, splashier promotion, more streamlined organization. The world’s production values make us look like bumpkins and rustics…All that really distinguishes us from all the other people on the face of the earth is that God is with us.” And that is all that matters. This passage reminds us that God is able to work in what appears to be weakness, in the unimpressive, the failing nothings, and do something glorious.

GOD VALUES RELATIONSHIP WITH US

Martin Luther was astounded by what he called God’s Left Handed Power. Luther referred to right handed power as having the ability to force one’s way. The right handers by dint of their larger majority have the ability to make the world fit their right handedness. So right handed power is the straight line ability to force your way. It is about control, force. When the bully tells a victim to give him his lunch money or he’ll beat him up, he is using right handed power. When Vladimir Putin invades Ukraine in an effort to force it to cede territory to him, he is using right handed power. When a boss tells an employee to do things the way he wants it done or he will be fired, he is using right handed power. When a spouse tries to get their husband or wife to do what they want or they will yell at them or just shut them out, they are trying to use right handed power.

Right handed power has one big advantage. It gets things done. Almost everything that happens in this world is accomplished through right handed power at some point. It is very effective. Left handed power is very different. Years ago when I was having trouble with my right elbow and thought I had a bad case of tennis elbow, it made it impossible for me to play tennis, which I wanted to keep enjoying. I knew of a friend who had similar difficulty who went to work trying to learn to play left handed. I decided to give that a try. For a brief time I practiced hitting a tennis ball left handed. I didn’t stick with it very long. That’s because it was so awkward. I looked and felt like a kook. I could hardly do anything. It was pathetic. Just trying to hit a ball over a net was a challenge. Actually just hitting the ball was a challenge. I was lucky to hit the ball at all, and there was zero power when I did. It was so bad it felt like minus power. And that’s kind of the point of the analogy. Left handed power looks like no power at all. It looks like pure weakness.

What we see in this story is God’s left handed power. Becoming a human baby, being raised by anonymous, powerless people, being rejected and ultimately ruthlessly executed, is not right handed power. It does not look like power at all. The astounding thing is that God has all power. He could have used right handed power, because he owns power. It all comes from him. Instead he chose what appeared to be weakness. He chose that which looked like losing, not winning. And yet, somehow in choosing that path he accomplished the most powerful thing in history! He did it by using left handed power. But given that he could have used right handed power, because he has a universe of it, we have to ask why?

There is an enormously important truth that we should never lose sight of. It is that right handed power damages and destroys relationships and people. When you are using right handed power, you are not loving another person. Consider how things will be between the Russian people and the Ukrainian people when the war in Ukraine is over. Do you suppose there will be love and unity there? There is going to be hostility, resentment and hatred. That is what the use of right handed power will always produce.

Years ago it was a beautiful, sunny day, I was driving down Vulcan Avenue on my way to a lunch meeting, enjoying the ocean view as I drove. The day suddenly turned much less beautiful when I spotted red and blue lights flashing behind me. I pulled over, expecting the police officer to go by in pursuit of some evil doer. It turned out I was the evil doer. He informed me that I was speeding. I found this hard to believe because I was not going especially fast. He said I was going 5 miles per hour over the speed limit. I said, “Are you kidding me? You’re going to give me a ticket for that?” He did, because he had the power to do so. He used his power to make me pay a fine and, maybe worse, to attend traffic school, a form of cruel and unusual punishment. Do you think that endeared me to that officer? All day when I was in traffic school I found myself resenting that guy. When you use right handed power in any relationship, that’s what it does.

In 2 Corinthians 1:3 Paul called God, “The Father of compassion and the God of all comfort.” Consider the word compassion. Passion used as part of that word is from its older meaning, which is suffering. The “Com” at the beginning means “with.” So to have compassion is to suffer with someone. When we love someone and they hurt, we cannot help but enter into their suffering with them.

I have my next immune therapy treatment in 10 days. I’m not looking forward to it. The first attempt did not go well, and I’m apprehensive that I’m going to have a rerun. The administration of the drugs takes some time, but it’s not a big deal. However, Laurie has insisted that she is going to go with me and be there. I told her she doesn’t have to do that, because it takes several hours of mostly sitting around. But she has said, “I’m going.” That’s because she loves me, she knows the experience is kind of stressful, and she can’t help but enter into it. She has compassion for me. She just feels like she has to suffer with me.

Do you know what that does? I could handle that all by myself. No problem. But I have to admit, having her there would be a big comfort. It would make the whole experience much easier. Her desire to make that effort fills my heart with gratitude toward her, it causes me to love her even more. It makes me want to be able to love and serve her like she loves me. It draws me to her and impacts my heart in a powerful way. That is left handed power. It does something that no amount of right handed power can ever do. Right handed power can force people to do what you want them to do, but it can never put love for you in their heart. It does just the opposite. It causes them to resent it. It cannot change their heart in a positive way. Only left handed power can do that.

What we see in the story of the birth of Jesus Christ is a mind boggling pile of left handed power. It is compassion at work. It is God sacrificing to enter into our suffering by becoming a helpless human child, by living as an anonymous oppressed person, and finally suffering rejection and infinite pain and loss. Raw power and force cannot create love and intimacy, and that is what God wants with us. So he chose compassion, love, sacrifice, service beyond our ability to measure.

Theologian John Stott wrote, “In the real world of pain, how could one worship a God who was immune to it?” No one, so God entered this world and took an infinite helping of pain. Have you ever felt unnoticed and unvalued? Jesus, the Savior of the world, was ignored by most of the world, and those who noticed him treated him like scum. Have you ever been let down by friends? Jesus’ best friends constantly misunderstood him, failed to believe in him, one of them betrayed him, and they all crumbled in his worst moment. Have you been disappointed? Jesus came to save his own people and they put him on a cross. Do you struggle with pain? His was infinite. Jesus led the league in being treat unfairly. He entered into every pain we have so that we could know he has been there and he understands. He did it all because what he wanted most was an intense, close love relationship with us, and that left handed power was the only way to draw us into it.

So what should we do about that? There are two ways to apply it. First, live in that love relationship with him. Understand the depth of his love for you. Be grateful for it, and love him back.

Second, follow his example. Choose to give up the addiction we all have to right handed power, and live with left handed power. Seek to treat everyone in a way that they will feel valued, loved, understood, cared for. Seek to draw them to you, not force them to be or do what you want them to do. We can use right handed power and get our way, or we can use left handed power and draw others to us with love and serving. But we can’t do both at the same time. Never forget, left handed power looks weak, looks like losing, but in the end it is far more powerful than right handed power, for it is made of love, and love heals and brings life.