

- I. The Shortest Day; Sunday, December 21, 2014  
(Sunnyslope)

Psalm 19:14

May the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be  
pleasing in your sight, O LORD, my Rock and my Redeemer.

- A. "Good morning, church!"
- B. Today is the shortest day of the year
1. It's because today is the Winter Solstice
  2. Today has least amount of daylight the whole year
  3. The sun rose today at 7:55 AM and will set at 4:22 PM
  4. However, there is some good news
- C. The good news is that starting tomorrow, every day will get slightly longer than the previous
1. It starts changing at first very, very slowly
  2. Tomorrow, for example, will be only 2 seconds longer than today
  3. But then it speeds up
  4. So that by the summer the sun won't be setting at 4:22 PM but after 9 PM
- D. And of course, we should also remember that Christmas is less than 4 days away
- E. Today, unfortunately, is dark for other reasons
1. Yesterday, I heard the news stories of police being attacked and killed in New York
  2. And today, the news stories continue
  3. Our country is becoming even more divided
  4. More divided along philosophical lines than we've been since I think the Civil War

- F. In dark times, we hope for the light to return
  - 1. And sometimes, in the darkest of times, the darkness can feel overwhelming
    - a) When overwhelmed, we feel we don't have any control; we feel powerless
    - b) When we feel powerless, we can sometimes slide into mental stagnation
  - 2. When in dark and difficult times, we can often fall into the trap of abdicating our responsibility to critically think
  - 3. In other words, we get so overwhelmed by the darkness that we shutdown our thinking so we don't have to deal with all the darkness
- G. Church, I worry when so many people voluntarily elect to stop critically thinking
- H. It reminds me of something, a lesson, a false lesson, I was taught when growing up
  - 1. The lesson is a bit of a paraphrasing of a famous poem, but it goes like this:  
Yours is not to question why  
Yours is but to do and die
  - 2. When as a child I questioned my parents, this is what I was told in response
    - a) My job as a child, my role, was not to question the decisions of my parents
    - b) But instead my job was to simply obey without thinking
    - c) My parents used this phrase to instruct me to not ask questions
- I. Later on in life, when I joined the Navy, one of the first things I had to do was survive boot camp
  - 1. My company commander used almost the same phrase on us recruits

Don't question why  
Just do and die

2. As a very, very junior enlisted men, the Navy wanted us to not think
  3. The Navy and its commanders would do our thinking for us
  4. Our job was not to think; it was to obey
- J. Now where does this phrase come from?
1. It's actually a paraphrasing of a fairly famous poem written in 1854 by Alfred, Lord Tennyson
  2. "The Charge of the Light Brigade"
  3. It's a poem written about a charge of 600 men during the Battle of Balaclava during the Crimean War
  4. The specific section is:  
Theirs not to make reply,  
Theirs not to reason why,  
Theirs but to do and die:  
Into the valley of Death  
Rode the six hundred.
  5. Now the poem was written in praise of the 600 men who charged into the battle
  6. They rode (on horseback) into battle despite cannons all around them firing at them
  7. They were ordered to do so, and they obeyed without a question
  8. The problem, though, is that they all died
- K. But regardless, the thesis of the statement "Don't question why, just do and die" is:
1. Don't ask questions
  2. Don't think for yourself
  3. Do what you're told (and be ready to die)

- L. Now unfortunately, that mindset, which can be a necessity in the heat of battle, is praised as a proper mindset outside the heat of battle
- M. In some Christian circles, this thesis is used to shutdown questions and thinking when bad things happen
  - 1. For example, let's say some bad things happen either in our country, or to the local church, or to folks within the church
  - 2. Evil exists in our world
    - a) It always has
    - b) And it always will until Christ returns
  - 3. And so we, as humans living in this world, are negatively affected by evil
  - 4. And in some Christian circles, the existence of evil and its impact on us is uncomfortable
    - a) Instead of dealing with the evil
    - b) Or explaining the evil
    - c) The choice is made to ignore it, don't question it, and don't think about it
  - 5. Some would even go so far as to use small parts of Scripture to try to prove that we're not supposed to think
  - 6. That our job is to obey God in ignorance
  - 7. To simply do and die
  - 8. There's the account in Luke, chapter 1 where Zacharias questions and is silenced
  - 9. We're told this is an example and lesson that we should not ask questions
  - 10. God is thereby transformed into someone who arbitrarily acts, and we need to just go along ignorantly (persisting in our ignorance)

- N. But I tell you, God does not want us to persist in ignorance
- II. Scripture tells us that it's right and good to ask questions in search of knowledge and wisdom
- A. We are called time and time again to seek God's wisdom, to inquire of God, to ask questions
  - B. Part of the Christmas story contained in Luke provides us a chance to acquire a remarkable insight about questioning in the pursuit of knowledge and wisdom
  - C. Let's compare 2 passages from Luke, chapter 1

Luke 1:11-20

<sup>11</sup>Then an angel of the Lord appeared to him, standing at the right side of the altar of incense. <sup>12</sup>When Zechariah saw him, he was startled and was gripped with fear. <sup>13</sup>But the angel said to him: "Do not be afraid, Zechariah; your prayer has been heard. Your wife Elizabeth will bear you a son, and you are to call him John. <sup>14</sup>He will be a joy and delight to you, and many will rejoice because of his birth, <sup>15</sup>for he will be great in the sight of the Lord. He is never to take wine or other fermented drink, and he will be filled with the Holy Spirit even before he is born. <sup>16</sup>He will bring back many of the people of Israel to the Lord their God. <sup>17</sup>And he will go on before the Lord, in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the parents to their children and the disobedient to the wisdom of the righteous—to make ready a people prepared for the Lord."

<sup>18</sup>Zechariah asked the angel, "How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years."

<sup>19</sup>The angel said to him, "I am Gabriel. I stand in the presence of God, and I have been sent to speak to you and to tell you this good news. <sup>20</sup>And now you will be silent and not able to speak until the day this happens, because you did not believe my words, which will come true at their appointed time."

- D. Now from this passage alone, we might conclude that questioning anything from God is a very bad idea and should be avoided
- E. But let's look just a little but down in the same chapter to a similar story

Luke 1:28-34

<sup>28</sup>The angel went to her and said, “Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.”

<sup>29</sup>Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>But the angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, <sup>33</sup>and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

<sup>34</sup>“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

- F. Now we know of course that Mary was not forbidden from speaking for months
- G. Why the difference between Mary and Zechariah?
- H. Let’s look at the two questions closely:

Luke 1:18

Zechariah asked the angel, “How can I be sure of this? I am an old man and my wife is well along in years.”

Luke 1:34

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?”

- I. There’s a very subtle difference between these two questions, and it’s easy to miss
  - 1. “How can I be sure of this” is questioning from a position of missing faith
    - a) In other words: “How can I believe what you’re telling me”
    - b) “What you’re saying is not credible”
  - 2. By contrast, Mary’s “How will this be” is asking for knowledge, for wisdom
    - a) It’s not a question from disbelief, but rather a question about how the prophecy will take place
    - b) It’s a question for information with full expectation that the prophecy is true

- J. Both Zechariah and Mary were devout believers in God; one could argue that Zechariah was more devout
- K. But Zechariah had difficulty believing the message he was given, whereas Mary did not have difficulty
- L. We need to be like Mary, not like Zechariah
- M. But being like Mary means not being passive, not doing nothing, but instead asking questions to fill in the gaps in our knowledge and wisdom

III. God wants us to learn and become wise

- A. But we need to actively work towards learning and becoming wise
- B. It's not a passive process where we just sit around and presto, it happens
- C. So then what are the steps to acquiring wisdom?
  - 1. First, I believe, is to accept that we need wisdom
    - a) That we don't already know enough
    - b) That we can and are still wrong about a great many things and need to see after God's wisdom always, every day, even to our very last day
  - 2. Next is to seek after God
    - a) If you want to know God's heart on a given issue or when you have to make a difficult decision, you need to ask Him
    - b) Take time to pray every day
    - c) But in your times of prayer, don't do all the talking
    - d) Listen for God's still, small voice whispering His words of guidance and encouragement to you
  - 3. Read the Bible daily

- a) Then meditate on God's Word
  - b) You will gain insight into God's mind and heart by studying Scripture and meditating on its truth
  - c) Difficult decisions become easier to make when God is guiding you
4. But reading the Bible and prayer are not enough; we must also do our utmost to obey the principles of Scripture, to obey the commands of Christ
- a) When you set your heart on obeying God, He will teach you how to apply His truth in your life
  - b) Then you will know the way of wisdom
5. We need to also observe the faithfulness of God
- a) We can observe His faithfulness through reading of His faithfulness to others both in Scripture and throughout history
  - b) We need to expect that God will fulfill His promises, because He always does
  - c) Expecting is a part of faith
  - d) The Lord has never failed to keep a single promise He has made
  - e) The Bible is full of testimonies that celebrate His goodness and love
6. And finally, we need to associate with wise people
- a) It is an illusion to think we can acquire wisdom in isolation from other Christians
  - b) And it's selfish to think that if we can acquire wisdom in isolation, we then have no calling to share it with others

- D. As we conclude the final days before Christmas, as we wait expectantly for Christmas to come, let's be just as expectant of the fulfillment of God's promises for ourselves and our world as we are that Christmas is less than 4 days away
- E. When in dark and difficult times, we can often fall into the trap of abdicating our responsibility to critically think
- F. Let's remember that instead of living in ignorance, God desires us to live in wisdom
- G. Let's reject the notion of avoiding thought
  - 1. Do not shrug and say, "My role is just to do and die"
  - 2. Accept our shared calling to wisdom
  - 3. Seek God
  - 4. Read Scripture
  - 5. Obey Christ's commandments
  - 6. And remember God's faithfulness
- H. Amen