

Northwest Community Evangelical Free Church

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Sermon manuscript

Our Meddlesome God

(Galatians 4:4-5)

Introduction: Butting in...

I don't know about you, but I would never walk into my neighbor's home without knocking first. That's just not done. Protocol demands that I knock and be invited in before entering.

Unless, of course, I'm leaving my house early in the morning and notice flames shooting out from my neighbor's windows and I know that he and his family are all asleep inside.

In that case I would "break in" to his house by whatever means necessary without giving a second's thought to protocol, propriety, or politeness.

Entering without knocking is rude in one case, the ultimate act of love in the other.

As I've mentioned many times my father-in-law is an excellent auto mechanic and has been very, VERY helpful over the years with advice as well as "hands-on" help with my vehicles.

Over the years he has answered dozens of questions I've brought to him about the condition of our cars.

He's never - not once - butted in with a comment about the sorry shape his daughter's car is in, asked what I was thinking when I bought an incorrect repair part, or berated me for having botched a do-it-yourself job.

That would have been to meddle, and my father-in-law, bless his heart, has never meddled.

In a book by Christian counselor Larry Crabb, he wrote of a time when he and his wife, Rachael, were having dinner with good friends. This was simply a social get-together with another couple, but (illustrating how dangerous it is to get together with a counselor, socially) Larry noticed that the husband was being rude and insensitive to his wife. During the meal, Larry pointed this out.

He pointed it out. His advice wasn't asked for. It wasn't a counseling session.

I've tried to imagine being the friend at that outing as he observed over dessert and coffee, "*Dave, I've noticed this evening that you've made a number of comments that have left Kathy badly wounded.*"

Would you classify that observation as interference? An intrusion? Meddling? Or helpful?

Parents are thankful for the intervention of a young man who runs out into the street to push their child out of the way of an on-coming truck. He wasn't meddling - he was rescuing a child from certain death!

The family of an alcoholic - or someone addicted to drugs, sex, violence, gambling, or gaming - who is ruining his or her life is grateful to the friends and counselors who are willing to stage an intervention to pressure change.

Depending on your perspective and the way the action is taken, outside involvement will be named "intervention" or "meddling" or "rescuing" or "helping" or "interfering."

So, depending on the type of intervention we are talking about, it can be really helpful or really harmful.

Throughout history there have been those who have believed that God does not intervene. He is not the meddling type. We call such people "deists."

Deism, 101

A “hands-off” God

Deists believe that God is a “hands-off” God. Deists say that the world and we, the people in the world, are pretty much on our own.

The concept behind deism is that God created the world and everything in it and then removed Himself from active involvement.

He got things rolling, but He doesn’t insert Himself into our messes. He has left principles to guide us and truths to lead us but He doesn’t interfere and He doesn’t intervene. He doesn’t meddle.

Webster defines deism as “a belief in a God who created the world but has since [the creation] remained indifferent to it.”

Deistic Thinkers

Throughout history...

Deism was formally stated as a theological position in the late 1600’s and into the 1700’s in Great Britain and Europe.¹ Deists referred to God as “the grand architect” or “the divine watchmaker” implying that He had wound up the universe at the beginning and that it is now winding down by itself without any interference from Him.

But if Deism was named in Renaissance era Europe, the thinking that God does not intervene is as old as thinking itself.

Deistic thought is found in Plato’s writings (5th century BC). And there is evidence that the biblical writers were familiar with people who espoused Deistic ideas, too.

The Apostle Peter anticipated the deistic mindset.

In the Bible...

[2 Peter 3:3] Know this first of all, that in the last days mockers will come with their mocking, following after their own lusts, [4] and saying, “Where is the promise of His coming? For ever since the fathers fell asleep, all continues just as it was from the beginning of creation.”

That was not Peter’s perspective - but there were people in his day who believed that God did not intervene. They thought that He didn’t meddle.

It wouldn’t be difficult to find people who think the same in 2011.

Today...

If you took a “man on the street” interview I suspect that you would find lots of people who believe that God doesn’t meddle. People all around us see wars and global hunger and the AIDS epidemic and atrocities committed against women - and more and wonder that God doesn’t do anything about it all.

They come to the conclusion that God doesn’t meddle. He doesn’t intervene. There is no help coming from Heaven.

And now, let’s be honest.

It wouldn’t be hard to find people today IN THE CHURCH who believe that God doesn’t meddle.

Many of us might not say it out loud, but we’re not all that convinced that God is an intervening God.

Fueling the thought of a deistic God is our life experience. How many times have we wished/prayed/hoped for God’s intervention and it didn’t happen?

Couldn’t you tell stories of those situations when the intervention of God would have been HUGE - and it didn’t happen?

¹ Deists would include the British Edward Herbert, the French Voltaire, and Americans Thomas Paine, and, to a lesser extent, Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson (both of whom had some leanings toward theism).

Has that, at times, moved you to wonder if God was the kind of God who would ever intervene? Having tasted His non-intervention, have you begun to lose hope that He will ever intervene?

Is it possible that some of us are, for all intents and purposes, Christian Deists?

Contrast this with the picture the Bible paints of God. Just listen as I read a few choice verses highlighting the theme of God's active involvement in His world.

Theism, 101

An imminent/transcendent God!

The author of the book of Hebrews writes, ***[Hebrews 11:6] And without faith it is impossible to please God, for the one who comes to God must believe that He is and that He is a rewarder of those who seek Him.***

God notices who trusts Him and Scripture declares God to be the kind of God who actively rewards faith - in the life to come, certainly, but also in this life.

Or what about Paul's words, written to the church at Philippi, ***[1:6] For I am confident of this very thing, that He who began a good work in you will perfect it until the day of Christ Jesus.***

Or, again, these words written to the church at Rome, ***[8:28] And we know that God causes all things to work together for good to those who love God, to those who are called according to His purpose.***

Or what about the words of James, written to a bunch of mostly poor, persecuted Jewish Christians ***[5:16] Therefore, confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another so that you may be healed. The effective prayer of a righteous man can accomplish much.***

These Bible verses don't describe a sitting-on-the-sidelines, hands-off God. They speak of a God who is intimately involved with the stuff of our lives, rewarding and transforming us, answering prayers and orchestrating events to our good.

This is such an incredibly important theme to consider this morning. Does God break through in our lives? Does God sit in Heaven and watch? Can we count on His active involvement in what's going on, or are the Deists right?

The Bible says He's active. It says it in direct teachings and illustrates it with story after story. Here's a "fer instance" direct from the life of Abraham.

Fer instance...

Abraham and the ram

This story comes from Genesis 22 and begins with God calling out to Abraham, the friend of God. When God said, ***"Abraham!"*** - old one hundred and ten year old Abraham had no idea what the next day would hold for him.

God told Abraham, ***[2]... "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you."***

Isaac - his name means *"laughter!"* - is likely a teenager at this point. After a quarter of a century of waiting for the fulfillment of God's promise, Isaac was born to Abraham and Sarah. Isaac is the one through whom God's promise were to pass.

And now, Abraham is being asked to give Isaac back to the God who gave him in the first place. Previously, Abraham's faith had been proved in waiting for something - a son! Now, his faith will be proved in giving that someone away.

In writing the story, Moses tells us that the very next morning Abraham got up early, went about splitting wood for the sacrifice, saddling up the donkey, and taking off.

His heart may be breaking. He may be confused beyond words. But he trusts and obeys.

The trip was at least fifty miles from the land of the Philistines where Abraham and Sarah and Isaac were living to the land of Moriah. When they arrived with servants at the base of the mountain, Abraham left the donkey with the servants as he and Isaac climbed Mount Moriah, together.

We can only imagine the brutality of this climb.

It would have been brutal for the difficulty of the terrain AND for the purpose of the hike. Isaac carried the wood for his own sacrifice. Abraham carried the knife he planned to use on his son.

Upon reaching the summit, Abraham didn't stall. Having received his orders from God, he carried them out to a "t."

The old father himself had to do the backbreaking labor of gathering the stones to form the altar on which he was to offer his son.

Then, he took his strapping, strong, teenage son, bound him with rope, and laid him on the altar on top of the wood Isaac himself had carried up the mountain on his own shoulders.

With everything in place for the sacrifice he had been commanded to offer, Abraham prepared to obey God, at whatever cost.

[10] Abraham stretched out his hand and took the knife to slay his son.

The text doesn't say that Abraham actually lifted the knife over his head, although that is the sense I get. The knife is unsheathed. It is in Abraham's hand.

As far as we know, it has now been days since the Lord has said anything to Abraham. It has been a very loud silence since the original intervening, meddling command had been given to sacrifice Isaac.

Then, at just the right time, God intervened!

[11a] But the angel of the Lord called to him from heaven and said, "Abraham, Abraham!"

I personally don't think that the second "***Abraham***" was necessary! From the first "***Abraham***" the angel had Abraham's complete and undivided attention.

He responded, *[11b]... "Here I am."*

God stopped Abraham from sacrificing Isaac at just the right time. He provided instead a ram, caught in the thicket by his horns for Abraham to sacrifice.

[14] Abraham called the name of that place The Lord Will Provide, as it is said to this day, "In the mount of the Lord it will be provided."

The Lord provides. The Lord does indeed provide. The Lord intervenes. He does indeed intervene!

And it is only time that prohibits us from going into detail and telling the stories of other interventions.

Others...

- The parting of the Red Sea with the Egyptians threatening to attack;
- The provision of manna to the Israelites for food throughout their wilderness wanderings;
- The stoppage of the flow of the Jordan River so that the Jews could cross into Palestine;
- The tumblin' down walls surrounding the city of Jericho;
- Elijah and the start and end of a drought by means of prayer;
- Elisha and the raising of a widow's son from the dead;

All of these make a completely compelling case for the idea that God meddles. History really is "His" story.

But there is no evidence for the intervention of God that rivals what we see in the events surrounding the birth of Jesus.

First, there were angelic appearances.

Incarnational Intervention

Intervening Angels

An angel appeared to Zacharias in the Temple

When the Gospel of Luke opens, we are brought into the story of the aged priest, Zacharias, and his wife, Elizabeth. They are childless and are past the point at which Elizabeth can conceive.

And just how elderly were they? For years I envisioned Zacharias being what we would call today a “senior citizen.” Certainly active, not feeble. But well into his sixties, maybe his seventies or beyond.

Then I got to thinking... (always dangerous, I know)

Luke tells us that Zacharias was active as a priest. And in the Old Testament Moses wrote that a man could work as an active priest ONLY until he was fifty, at which time he had to retire because the work was too strenuous.

This means that Zacharias, this OLD MAN, “*advanced in years,*” was in his FORTIES. Personally, I find that somewhat insulting...

Anyway, this “elderly” couple had desperately longed for children for their whole married lives. At this point in their story they are not only childless, they have no hopes for children.

One eventful day, Zacharias received news that would change all of that.

On this day Zacharias was serving his turn as a priest, minding God’s business in the Temple, when an angel - Gabriel - showed up.

Gabriel announced to Zacharias that he and Elizabeth were going to have a son and that Zacharias should name his son, “John.”

Undoubtedly Zacharias was thrilled at the news Gabriel brought. After all those years of waiting and hoping and praying they would finally have a child.

But Zacharias had a question. Roughly translated, he asked Gabriel, “*How can I know this for sure?*”

That was the wrong question to have asked! Gabriel stood in the presence of God. He spoke with authority. He was to be believed!

And Gabriel, rebuking Zacharias for this faithlessness, struck him dumb. Not dead, but dumb. Zacharias would not be able to speak until after the child was born.

An angelic appearance. A miracle of silence. It is a breakthrough. Anti-Deism. Intervention.

This same Gabriel made another unexpected visit to a young woman living in the city of Nazareth about six months later.

Angel appeared to Mary

This young woman, Mary, was simply living her life. She was engaged to a man to be married. She was a God-fearing Jewish peasant in a small village where nothing ever happened.

Gabriel’s news to her was even more dramatic than the news to Zacharias that Elizabeth would bear a son.

Gabriel told her, [30]... “*Do not be afraid, Mary; for you have found favor with God. [31] “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall name Him Jesus. [32] “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High; and the Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David; [33] and He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and His kingdom will have no end.”*

When Mary, said, essentially, “*Thanks, but HOW, since I have never been with a man?*” Gabriel answered, simply, [35]... “*The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; and for that reason the holy Child shall be called the Son of God....[37] For nothing will be impossible with God.”*

To which Mary responded, [38] *Behold, the bondservant of the Lord; may it be done to me according to your word.*

Again, Deism rejected. God meddles.

On the night of Jesus' birth angels appeared to some shepherds out in the fields, as they were keeping watch over their flocks by night.

Angels appeared to shepherds

Like Mary and Zacharias, these shepherds weren't doing anything special. They were doing what they did. Protecting and providing for their sheep, when all of a sudden, out of nowhere -

[9]...an angel of the Lord suddenly stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them; and they were terribly frightened. [10] But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for behold, I bring you good news of great joy which will be for all the people; [11] for today in the city of David there has been born for you a Savior, who is Christ the Lord. [12] "This will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in cloths and lying in a manger." [13] And suddenly there appeared with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, [14] "Glory to God in the highest, And on earth peace among men with whom He is pleased."

Talk about an intervention! A quiet night interrupted by angels!

And there's more.

Intervening Dreams

When Mary broke the news of her pregnancy to Joseph, her fiancé, he was ready to cut off the engagement, convinced that she had been unfaithful to him. I mean, what would YOU have thought if you had been Joseph?!

But he was convinced by God IN A DREAM that Mary was telling him the truth - and he didn't break off the engagement.

And then magi from the east (wise men) who had just seen Jesus and worshiped Him in a home in Bethlehem (NOT at the stables!) were warned by God IN A DREAM to not go back home by way of Jerusalem to report to Herod.

Intervening Miracles

To round things out, not only was Zacharias given an angelic announcement of the birth of his son, the miracle actually occurred. His wife, Elizabeth - who was beyond the age of child-bearing - conceived and gave birth to John (the Baptist).

And then, miracle to end all miracles, the granddaddy of all interventions, the virgin Mary conceived by the Holy Spirit and gave birth to Jesus, the Son of God.

The whole Bethlehem event, including a *seemingly* unrelated decree from Caesar to take a census, which required Joseph to travel to Bethlehem, was one grand orchestrated intervention.

The Apostle Paul had his own way of putting it in his letter to the churches of Galatians.

Just in the Nick of Time... (Galatians 4:4-5)

[4] But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son born of a woman, born under the Law, [5] so that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons.

When we read that Christ came "*in the fullness of the time*" we are to understand that there was a timeliness to Jesus' appearance.

He came during the *pax Romana*, a three centuries long season of unparalleled peace and world stability that dominated the Indo-European world.

At the time of Jesus' birth there were good Roman roads and a common language (Greek). Paganism's decline created a vacuum into which Christianity easily slid.

And biblically, the time was ripe for Jesus' arrival.

In a fascinating study, New Testament scholar Harold Hoehner discovered that Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem on Palm Sunday, when He

allowed the crowds to declare Him King, was precisely - TO THE DAY! - the day that was predicted for the nation to enter its messianic rest.²

In every way, every year Christmas shouts, “*Deism is dead. God is alive. He is an intervening God. He meddles.*”

Conclusion:

So today we worship God because of the WOW-inducing ways in which He intervened in human history two thousand years ago in the birth of Jesus!

But we also worship God because we understand that this - intervention - has been God’s way from the beginning.

He was an intervening God in the days of Abraham and Joshua and Elijah and in the days of Jesus and the apostles. He is, by nature, an intervening God today, too.

Christmas, celebrated rightly, helps us understand God. And the truth about God we have observed today is His penchant to break through into history and do the things that only He can do.

One of our former elders, Konrad Kern, was fond of saying, “*There is no problem here that a miracle wouldn’t fix.*”

Amen.

And there are problems. Look around and you will see:

- poverty and disease;
- lives wrecked by wicked addictions;

- families torn apart by strife;
- corruption and injustice in high and low places;
- once strong relationships now fractured due to lack of forgiveness;
- friends and family far from the God who created and loves them.

And our God is an intervening God. He cares. His compassion is stirred by the suffering He sees.

Let’s open our eyes and our ears. Listen watch and see what God is up to. Let’s listen carefully to hear the stories of God at work. He is restoring. He is moving.

Where could we have ever gotten the idea that God no longer intervenes? What verses could we have ever used to get the idea that God no longer does the things that only He can do? What a horrible misunderstanding to think that God sits on His hands, watching the world He wound up wind down.

God IS and God CARES. He is still the graciously meddling God. And so we act and so we pray. Not because we want to have an active or even a praying church, but because we are desperate for God to do in our midst the things that only He can do, to His everlasting glory.

² Chronological Aspects of the Life of Christ, Harold W. Hoehner, Zondervan Publishing House, 1974, pp. 138-39. Hoehner traces the “seventy weeks” of Daniel (seventy periods of seven years) from March 4, 444 BC (the decree of Artaxerxes to Nehemiah to rebuild the walls around Jerusalem and, by extension rebuild and restore the city, Nehemiah 2:1). Using the prophetic year of 360 days, the 69 “weeks” of captivity Daniel predicts is completed on March 30, AD 33, the day of the Triumphal Entry. The final week consists of the seven years of the Tribulation Period (Revelation 6-19).