

## “How Do You Handle Interruptions?”

Luke 1:26-38

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Mary had a lot on her mind, most brides-in-waiting do. She was engaged to a fine man by the name of Joseph and planning a wedding.

There was a lot to do to have a wedding in that culture. The celebration lasted anywhere from one week to a month. This was to allow people from all over the region to come to greet the new couple and get to know them. They did this so that when the couple traveled, they would be among friends that would know them and help them along their journey.

In addition to planning a wedding, Mary and Joseph were busy getting their home ready. Like most grooms, Joseph was building a house and the furniture that would go in it while Mary was filling her hope chest. You understand why the months prior to a wedding were very important and busy.

This was certainly true for Mary and Joseph. No doubt they were focused upon all that needed to be done before their wedding when God interrupted their plans with some startling news from His messenger, Gabriel. Listen to Luke's account from his first chapter.

*<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary.*

*<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 be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name 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 the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end."<sup>34</sup>"How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?"<sup>35</sup>The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. <sup>36</sup>Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. <sup>37</sup>For nothing is impossible with God."<sup>38</sup>"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said." Then the angel left her.*

**Why did God interrupt Mary's plans?** He had other plans for her. It was not that her plans were bad. As a matter of fact, Mary and Joseph's decision to get married and their careful preparation for their life together probably convinced God that what He had in mind for them would actually work. This was the very kind of couple, filled with grace and truth that God could trust to provide a good home for Jesus.

**How did Mary respond to this divine interruption?** At first she was afraid and certainly she asked questions, as anyone would do. Ultimately, though, her words reveal the mind of an obedient and faithful disciple. *"I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."*

Are you surprised by Mary's response? I must be candid and tell you that I am. This kind of faith is rare, especially when the risks are so high. I am deeply impressed by her level of commitment to God and willingness to suspend her plans. Trading her dream for God's was another Christmas miracle.

On my recent trip to Israel, Dr. Peter Rhea Jones said that just as Jesus is the mirror of God, Mary is the reflection of a true disciple. This young maiden, who laid her plans aside and said yes to God, shows all of us what it means to be a person of faith. As Dr. Jones said that day in Bethlehem, "Mary's yes is contagious!"

I recall what Dr. John Claypool said about Mary's response. "It was as if Gabriel made a motion and Mary seconded it." Only Dr. Claypool could say it so succinctly.

There is an Advent lesson in this passage that I do not want us to miss this morning. I am indebted to Lauren Winner, professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, for showing it to me. **"To live a life of faith we must let God interrupt us."**

Mary did and so did Joseph. The disciples fishing on the Sea of Galilee did. Saul on the Damascus Road did. So must we.

**“To live a life of faith we must let God interrupt us.”** Even the placing of this story supports this. Luke interrupts the account of John the Baptist’s birth to tell his readers about Gabriel coming to Mary with the news of her pregnancy. Just when you thought you were going to read more about Zechariah, Elizabeth and their son, Luke writes about another family whose plans were going to change dramatically.

**“To live a life of faith, we must let God interrupt us.”** It is not easy being interrupted, is it? We take great satisfaction in setting and achieving goals. Many of you have taken leadership courses and know how important it is to be organized, focused and driven. For the most part, distractions are not valued. Stephen Covey encourages leaders to distinguish between the urgent and important, focusing upon those activities that are important because they produce results that contribute to the organizational mission, values and goals. They are proactive, not reactive. Pursue them and minimize interruptions.

It is not my intent to undermine this philosophy of time management. It is valid. You know that I am a list maker, a high achiever, and find great pleasure in marking things off my list each day. To some degree, I measure the success of my day by the number of marks on my list.

I must tell you, though, that I have noticed over the years some things about the nature of God that are reinforced in this text. God is full of surprises, drawn to the ordinary and never makes appointments. Ministry, the kind that impacts people when they need it most, occurs during divine interruptions. Opportunities to serve God by helping others come when we are busily carrying out our own plans.

This was true of the disciples that Jesus called. Early in his ministry, Jesus met two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea because they were fishermen. “Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men,” Jesus said. “At once, they left their nets and followed him” Mark 1:17-18.

One of the most memorable parables Jesus told was that of the Good Samaritan. On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho, a man was overtaken by thieves, beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two religious leaders came upon him but ignored him because they did not want to interrupt their plans. The third man that came along stopped and helped the desperate man. He cleaned and bandaged his wounds and then took him to an inn where he could receive more attention.

Did the Samaritan stop because it was convenient for him or he was not busy? Evidently not, for he continued on his journey, but not before telling the innkeeper that he would return and settle up with him for the man’s care.

I wonder if Mary and Joseph’s response to God’s interruption of their wedding plans and dreams inspired Jesus to tell this story. Did their actions shape and mold his values? Sure they did.

**Why would God interrupt us anyway?** He is a matchmaker. He is always matching needs with resources. He knows those that are in need of encouragement, companionship, comfort or assistance and those that will cross their paths. Tirelessly, He works to bring them together.

**Is God trying to get your attention?** Is there someone with whom He is trying to match you? Are you ignoring Him or offering excuses for why you cannot respond to Him? I wonder what you are missing. I wonder what others are missing.

I have a minister friend that encourages his congregation to “work with whomever God sends. There is a reason your paths have crossed.” Jesus did this, didn’t he? So should we.

**Who suspended their plans when you needed them most?** Who allowed God to interrupt him or her and reach out to you when you were desperate? Where would you be today without that person?

This is Christmas week. Is there a busier time for any of us? I think not. If you are like me, you have a lot of things on your list to do before Christmas Day arrives. I understand. I also know God’s nature. He uses ordinary people along their journey to help those that are struggling and He doesn’t make appointments. So get ready. Be prepared for a divine interruption and remember, to live a life of faith means we let God interrupt us. Just ask Mary and Joseph.