

DIVINE INTERRUPTIONS
Isaiah 7:2-16 - Matthew 1:18-25
Sermon Preached by Dr. Cahill
Babcock Presbyterian Church
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It's a normal day, you're going through your regular routine, you're not expecting anything out of the ordinary, when suddenly you're confronted with a challenge. Someone approaches and says, "I need you to do something important. At this moment I can think of no one else except you. Only you have the talents and the temperament to do what needs to be done. Here's what I need you to do..."

As you're told what's expected, you sense a rising anxiety. You're not being asked to do something simple. You are challenged to do something significant that will put you at risk, cause some hardship and maybe even change your life.

So, your mind starts whirling as you quickly count the cost. Maybe you say, "Give me a few days to think about it." Or maybe you make excuses, "I'm not right for the job, surely you can ask someone better than me."

Tradition tells us Mary of Nazareth was fifteen or sixteen years old, which at that time was marrying age. There was nothing out of the ordinary about her. And yet, Mary was singled out from all the women who ever lived to be the mother of God's son. God created Mary with the spiritual gifts, natural talents and unique temperament for this life-changing task. And yet, even though only Mary could pull it off, only Mary could say, "Yes, I'll do it." Remember the gift of free will. God never forces us to do anything. God only invites and encourages.

Many of you have heard Advent sermons about Mary's predicament. She was a single girl, probably a teenager, engaged to a good man. She was a virgin, and her fiancé, Joseph, had no reason to think otherwise. So Mary was in great danger. If word got out she was pregnant, she would become a social outcast plus according to the Law of Moses, the crime of sexual infidelity brought the sentence of death by stoning.

Mary, however, showed herself to be a woman of mature faith. She answered, "**Here I am, the servant of the Lord, let it be according to your word.**"

You and I can learn a lot from Mary's courageous faith. By the grace of God, Mary was able to bravely accept her calling to be a participant in God's unfolding drama of salvation. One moment Mary was a young lady, planning her wedding, experiencing all the emotions of joy, expectation and hope for a wonderful future with the man she loved, and then in an instant her life was interrupted. Mary had to grow up fast, especially in her ability to trust that God would be actively present, helping her navigate the twists and turns, the dead ends and detours of life. She had to trust somehow God would seek out and empower Joseph to accept this unexpected news. And she had to trust that somehow God was using her for a wonderful purpose. Pretty heady stuff for a sixteen year old girl.

Question: Why did God interrupt Mary's nice life to be the mother of the Son of God? What was in her resume, what were her qualifications? Was it her potential for great faith, her latent motherly instincts, her DNA, her survival skills?

I think Gabriel's phrase, "**you have found favor with God**" gives us the only clue why God chose Mary. As I said Mary wasn't anyone special. The Bible doesn't tell us that Mary was supernatural, or sinless. Mary was just an ordinary human being chosen to be the mother of God's only son. Only one person in all human history could be chosen for that sacred task, and God chose Mary.

Mary wasn't the first to have her life interrupted in order to carry out God's will. You remember how God interrupted Abram, an old married man without children to be the father of a great nation. God interrupted Moses, the son of slaves, to lead the Hebrews out of bondage in Egypt and God interrupted David, a shepherd boy to be the greatest King of Israel.

How did a shepherd become the greatest King of Israel? Briefly here's the story. God gave the prophet Samuel a job to do, go on a search for the next King of Israel. God led Samuel to Jesse and his five sons. The likely candidate was Jesse's oldest son, but God said to Samuel, "**Do not look on his appearance or the height of his stature, because I have not chosen him. The Lord does not see what mortals see. They look on the outward appearance but the Lord looks on the heart.**" Like Mary, David, Jesse's youngest son and the least likely candidate, was God's choice.

I tell you how David came to be the chosen one of his generation as background to how God once again interrupted David's life by aborting his plan to build a house for the Lord.

David was now firmly established as Israel's King. He defeated all his enemies, foreign and domestic. He had built himself a palace fit for a king with all the symbols of royalty and power. But David was feeling guilty. "**Look,**" he said to the prophet Nathan, his spiritual counselor, "**Here I am living in this beautiful place while the Ark of the Covenant stays in a tent.**"

I'm sure even if you never picked up a Bible you're familiar with the Ark of the Covenant, made famous by the Spielberg movie, "**Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark.**" The ark was a portable box that held the two tablets of the ten commandments that the Hebrews carried with them throughout their 40 years of wandering in the wilderness and finally into the Promised Land. When the ark was not being moved about the Hebrews kept the ark in a tent.

Well, as I said, David was feeling guilty because he now lived in a new huge house while the ark of God was kept in a little old tent. So David began making plans to build a great house for God. And at first Nathan believed it was a good idea until God came to Nathan in a dream and interrupted David's good intentions.

God has better intentions. Instead of David building a house for God, God would build a house for David. And the house of David would be a dynasty, a royal line of descendants that would finally culminate in the coming of great David's greatest son, the Messiah, who would rule forever.

So God's intention was to establish an eternal Kingdom without boundaries, or as Jesus put it, "**a Kingdom not of this world.**" Now you can be sure that when David heard this promise he had no idea of its full implications. David could only see the political consequences, the guarantee that his dynasty would go on forever. How could David possibly foresee that God's promise would ultimately be played out in a stable in Bethlehem, a cross outside of the walls of his capital city and finally a nearby empty tomb?

And then this: How could David foresee the interruptions of the promise when his kingdom would be conquered and then ruled by the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and finally the Romans forcing his descendants to go underground and continue on in obscurity until a carpenter's son would rise up and claim his throne when he rode into Jerusalem on Palm Sunday only days later to receive a crown of thorns?

So God kept his promise but not according to David's expectations. God's ways are not our ways and sometimes there are interruptions, when it seems God is absent and the powers of darkness have the upper hand. But in the end, when all seems lost God always delivers. Our job, as God's people, as Jesus' disciples, is to submit and trust that when all is said and done, all things work together for good according to God's purposes.

Here's a quote that is worth remembering. "**A hallmark of being a faithful disciple is keeping the quiet confidence that no matter what happens to you God is still in control without you having the need to understand why God does what he does.**"

What was Mary's answer to the Angel Gabriel? "**I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said.**" God gave Mary the grace to trust that even though her life was intercepted by a surprise pregnancy, that this very interruption was part of God's plan for her. God's flowing presence within Mary enabled her to remain calm in the storm about to break out around her. God empowered Mary to be equal to the task.

When Mary received the message she was pregnant, she could have obsessed on everything bad that might happen to her. Instead Mary focused on the wonderful message and the power of God flowing in and through her.

When Israel was conquered and reconquered and David's descendants lost the throne and had to go into obscurity, there were always in Israel faithful men and women who were blessed with the quiet confidence that no matter what happened and how bleak it seemed God was still in control.

These were the faithful, waiting for God to raise up someone from the house and lineage of David who would deliver his people and rule forever. These were the faithful people of God who were able to keep alive the spirit of expectation because they focused on the wonderful message, "**I know that my redeemer liveth.**"

So now, what does all of this have to do with you and me? Everything. Even though its 2,000 years later the more things change the more things stay the same.

We too live in perilous times. Hanging over our Christmas preparations are the specter of war and our fear of terrorism. Some of you may be worried about your jobs, some of you are

grieving the death of loved ones, there are some here in emotional and spiritual turmoil, the list goes on.

If you are experiencing any of these things, you may find yourself wishing for a nice calm ordinary life. You may be wondering, **"When is the Messiah coming to me, to rescue me from my fears and despair? How much longer can I hang on?"**

One of the ongoing themes of Advent is active patient waiting, waiting for God's timing and trusting that God is already hard at work, behind the scenes, making things happen, making all things work together for God.

"Come Thou long-expected Jesus" is one of the carols of Advent. God's people waited a long time for the Messiah to come. Unfortunately when Jesus finally came many did not recognize him and many rejected him. Don't make the same mistake while you wait for Christ. He may come to you in a person or a task you may think beneath you. He may come in a challenge or a calling that might disrupt your life. But always he comes releasing you from your sins and fears, taking heavy burdens off your shoulders that you put there and shouldn't be there. But however God comes and interrupts your life be ready to be enveloped by his truth and grace.

This is the last Sunday in Advent. It's not too late to submit and trust. Be in prayer. Open yourself to the Christmas presence. Be alert to the signs and wonders that are all around you. Watch and wait for the Christ Child to interrupt your life so you can truly believe that all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to his purpose.

Let us pray!