

## “Interruptions”

Luke 2: 1-20

December 20, 2020

The house is dark and still. Outside, a storm rages. Branches scratch the windows. Lightning flashes across the sky. Thunder shakes the house. A small voice penetrates the night. It comes from the bedroom across the hall. “Daddy, I am scared!” Out of your groggy, fuzzy state, you respond with, “Honey, don’t be afraid. Mom and I are right across the hall.” After a brief pause the little voice is heard again, “I am still scared.” Always quick with insight you respond, “You don’t need to be afraid. God is with you. God loves you.” This time the pause is longer and then the thunder roars. The tiny voice screams “I know about God. But I want someone with skin on!”

It seems like the logic of a small child is exactly why God sent Jesus to live among us. Son of God. Emmanuel. God with us. Someone who is made out of the same stuff we are and who is made out of the same stuff God is, and who will not let any of us go. The birth of Jesus creates a bridge between the human and the divine. Jesus brings God to live in our midst - into our storms, our dark nights, our new days filled with infinite possibilities. Jesus also carries our humanity into the very being of God.

And it happened like this.....

Prayer for Understanding

Read Luke 2: 1-20

This morning I want to speak a word in praise of interruptions. Because it seems to me that the message, the song, of angels is always an interruption.

You know about life's interruptions. You open your eyes in the morning and begin your morning routine. It seems like yesterday just came to a close and a new day has dawned and the coming day is already full. Plans have been made; schedules coordinated to the infinite detail; tasks are ordered by priority and must be completed by day's end. And then mid-morning, the phone rings: "Mom, can you come get me from school?" or when my children were a little older I would hear, "Mom, I have a little problem....I have to have tuition money for graduate school – when? – today by 3 PM" ; or a tearful friend calls, "I really need to talk; do you have just a minute"; or your supervisor/colleague at work wants you to drop what you are doing to answer some questions or complete some task, immediately, before the day's end. Interruptions.

Beyond the interruptions of our daily routines, there are the more momentous interruptions that change the course of our lives. Such interruptions are seldom greeted as welcome - at least, at first. Career plans are interrupted by corporate downsizing and lay-offs; we plan to retire and enjoy our golden years together but death, or divorce, tosses our plans to our feet; a trip is anxiously anticipated when illness intrudes; the dreaded phone call informing us of accidents, a pandemic outbreak which we never anticipated would incapacitate us for over 9 months. We steer clear of interruptions, usually, if we can and clutch our plans tightly.

Interruptions, however, are God's preferred mode of confronting us. The word "interrupt" is derived from two Latin words: "inter" meaning "between", and "rumpere" which means "break in". When we think of interruptions, we usually experience them as the breaking up of our routines, when it may be that God is trying to break into our lives. Interruptions can be God's way of breaking in between our moments, breaking in between our harried rushing from this to that, breaking in between our rigid expectations, our dulled imaginations. Sometimes, God interrupts our lives, breaks in, so that we can see enough light to break out into the day of new life.

C. S. Lewis wrote: "The great thing is to stop regarding all the unpleasant things as interruptions of one's real life. The truth is...what one calls the interruptions are precisely one's real life - the life God is sending to us one day at a time."

Father Theodor Hessberg, former president of Notre Dame University, once observed that he would become impatient with students and faculty members who continually came to his office, interrupting his work, until the day he came to the realization that the interruptions were his work.

John Lennon once said in a song: "Life is what happens while you are making other plans."

What we perceive as interruptions may actually be God trying desperately to break into our lives. And the Bible is filled with examples of people pursuing their own plans and following their own routines when God suddenly interrupts them.

Jonah was asked by God to go to Ninevah to prophesy against the wickedness of

the people there – people he was taught since childhood to hate, fear, suspect. Why in the world would he want to give them an opening to change; to be saved? Jonah responds by booking passage on a ship headed in the opposite direction. But God’s plans will not be thwarted and so a storm, hurled by God, stops Jonah in his tracks. And we know the story; he is swallowed by a giant fish – God’s way of saving him, and he is stuck in the fish’s belly for 3 days so he could think over his decisions.

Moses was peacefully tending his flock when God rudely interrupts him with a burning bush and with a message to lead the people of Israel out of slavery.

Mary’s plans to be married are interrupted by an angel who tells her that she is to give birth to the Son of the God – the long expected Messiah, even though she has not yet married. Joseph plans a traditional wedding until Mary interrupts his plans with news of the angel’s visit.

Then there are the shepherds, minding their flocks and minding their business, the stillness of the night enfolding them like a blanket. I imagine that for a shepherd the quiet of the night is a blessing because it means that nothing is wrong, that the sheep are settling down and the shepherd can settle back, rest weary bones, and watch the night unfold. But then, an angel of the Lord appears, bringing a whole multitude of the heavenly hosts with her, saying that they are to leave it all to go and see this thing that has happened in Bethlehem and to greet the newborn king they will find there. It is a bright and loud interruption of the night, of their routines and of their lives.

God doesn’t keep God’s distance, but chooses to come as close to human life as

breath and bone and muscle. God takes on the kind of life we live - no longer is God out there, but God is inside us and among us. God puts on our skin. No longer is it necessary that we “lift our eyes to the hills”, rise above our anxieties, keep our heads above water, for the Lord our God has chosen to descend to us. As Barbara Brown Taylor says: none of heaven’s escalators are going up on the night Jesus is born. Everybody up there is coming down, right into our own Bethlehem, bringing us the God who has decided to make his home in our arms.”

Craig Barnes, who was a pastor in Washington, DC, writes: “Plans are what we develop on our own when life doesn’t turn out as we had hoped. Plans may be a response to disappointments. They can have a numbing effect that helps us cope by lulling us to sleep. (We are lulled into believing that we are in control of our lives.) The only way to wake up is to discover a dream.” Dreams have a lot in common with interruptions. They are the things that angels bring us. Both dreams and interruptions are unbidden and unforeseen. We do not ask for them, but we are invited to receive them. Both of them are occasions for us to see the world differently and ourselves differently. It is in dreams and interruptions that we can catch a vision of the God who is always trying to break in so that we can break free.

Now I know, I know, we feel uncomfortable and vulnerable if we do not have a health plan, a retirement plan, a dental plan, a financial plan, a career plan, and a life plan. There is nothing necessarily wrong with all those plans. And I know you Myers-Briggs “J” types like your plans. But there is a danger that we can become so enamored

of our plans that we may lose our ability to dream. We may respond to every interruption as a threat. But I would like to suggest that we respond to God's interruptions with praise. That we pause to consider how God is coming to us, breaking into this world in new and startling ways.

One of my favorite Christmas plays is "The Best Christmas Pageant Ever". It is the story of one church's annual Christmas play. As the church begins play practice, the Herdmans show up to participate. "The Herdmans were the worst kids in the whole history of the world. They lied and stole and smoked cigars, even the girls, and talked dirty and cussed their teachers and took the name of the Lord in vain and set fire to Fred Shoemaker's old broken down truck house. There were six of them. And all six of them wanted to be in the annual Christmas play. Imogene Herdman screamed her way into being Mary and on the night of the performance decided to burp the baby Jesus as the choir of sweet angels sang "Away in a Manger". Gladys Herdman was cast as the angel who announced the birth of Jesus, only her cat buried her halo, and she improvised on her lines. And the three Herdman boys, cast as the wisemen, on performance night walked onto the stage carrying a ham.

"They look awful. And what's that Leroy Herdman is carrying?"

"It's ....it's a ham!"

"A ham! I bet they stole it!"

"No....I think it's the ham from the basket the church delivered to their home."

“You mean it’s their own ham? Then they must hate ham.”

“Well, even if they hate ham, Alice, it’s the only thing they ever gave away in their whole life.”

“Because of the Herdmans, it was a whole new story – Imogene burping the baby, the wise men bringing such a sensible gift. After all, they couldn’t eat frankincense! And even Gladys declaring “he’s in the barn, go and see him”.... So the shepherds didn’t have to stumble around all over the countryside. But I guess it wasn’t like that for Imogene. For her, the Christmas pageant turned out to be all wonder and mystery, as if she just caught on to what Christmas was all about. The church’s carefully practiced annual Christmas pageant was full of interruptions because of the Herdman children, but they brought new meaning and understanding to what Christmas was all about!

“For unto you a child is born.” It is not a story that we would have ever come up with ourselves. It is nothing that we could have ever planned. It comes unbidden and unforeseen. It is a dream - God’s dream. It is an interruption. But in this season, for once perhaps, we just might let ourselves put aside our own plans long enough to greet a dream and an interruption as welcome indeed.