

“Interrupted By God”

Matthew 2:1-12 • Daniel 5:1-12

First Presbyterian Church, Corpus Christi, TX

Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • January 6, 2019

I think it's safe to say that sometimes life doesn't always go according to our plans. We have dreams and ideas of what we want our lives to be like. We make plans. We think we're in control. And then...then everything changes. Our neatly planned life takes an unexpected turn. Maybe it's a sudden illness or a death. Maybe someone you trusted has betrayed you or just walked out on you. All of us experience, at least to some degree, times when life just isn't going the way we wanted. And in those difficult times we ask, "where is God?" As it turns out, sometimes it's God who interrupts our life.

During Advent and Christmas our theme has been "God with us." The beginning of Matthew's gospel tells us that there was a young couple who were engaged to be married. It was discovered that the young woman was pregnant. Needless to say things were not going the way they planned. But an angel came to Joseph in a dream and told him that it was okay to go through with the marriage because the baby is from the Holy Spirit. Then Matthew says that this was to fulfill the prophecy in Isaiah and that Jesus would be called Immanuel, which means God with us. God interrupted Joseph and Mary's life.

The Bible is full of instances where God interrupts. He interrupted Noah's life, telling him to build a giant boat. He interrupted Abraham's life several times. As you think about the unexpected changes in your life you might find that it was God interrupting. I can tell you that going into ministry was not part of my plan. God interrupted.

This morning we're going to look briefly at another person in the Bible that had his life interrupted by God. Daniel was a young man, probably a young teenager, when Nebuchadnezzar, the king of Babylon, conquered Jerusalem. Daniel was also probably from the royal family or at least from nobility in

Jerusalem, which is why he was taken back to Babylon. In Daniel 1, Nebuchadnezzar orders that some of the "royal family and of the nobility, youths without blemish, of good appearance and skillful in all wisdom, endowed with knowledge, understanding, learning, and competent to stand in the king's palace" be brought from Jerusalem and that they be taught "the literature and language of the Chaldeans."

This was a major life change for Daniel and his friends who were captured. He would spend the rest of his life in a foreign country. But over and over again we're told that God was with Daniel. God gave him the ability to interpret dreams, which he did for several kings. Most of this morning's passage from Daniel 5 is about him interpreting the writing on the wall for King Belshazzar, Nebuchadnezzar's son. Dreams and visions have always been very important in Middle-Eastern culture. Even today they take dreams seriously and many Muslims are turning to Christ because he comes to them in a dream.

The Babylonian empire was centered in what is now Iran and it controlled much of the area around it. Through four different empires, including the Parthians, the Medes, and the Persians, there was a class of religious priests that had developed who were primarily astronomers and astrologers but who were also skilled at interpreting dreams. Over time they were given an official status in the government. In fact, the *megistanes* as they were known (which is where we get our word magistrate) had the sole authority to select the kings. They were king-makers and they had tremendous power and influence.

This is where it gets interesting. Because of the way God had gifted Daniel, he was appointed as the head of the *megistanes*. Beginning in verse 11, the queen tells Belshazzar about Daniel's ability to interpret the writing on the wall: "In the days of your

father, light and understanding and wisdom like the wisdom of the gods were found in him, and King Nebuchadnezzar, your father—your father the king—made him chief of the magicians, enchanters, Chaldeans, and astrologers, because an excellent spirit, knowledge, and understanding to interpret dreams, explain riddles, and solve problems were found in this Daniel.” By the way, it was the appointment of Daniel, a Hebrew foreigner, to the most powerful position in the empire, a position that had essentially been a family business until then, that led to the whole lion’s den incident.

Needless to say, Daniel was very influential and left a long-lasting mark. We don’t know how much he wrote that was passed from one generation to the next but we can assume it was significant. His prophecies about the Jewish people and the Messiah are recorded in the book of Daniel in the Bible. Fast forward nearly 600 years. The Magistanses, or Magi, are still around and they are still in the business of king-making. They still study Daniel’s prophecies. Night after night, year after year, they study the sky for important astrological signs. Then one day they see something that reminds them of what Daniel wrote. The waiting is over. A king is born in Israel. They go to see.

Today is the day in the church year that we call Epiphany. It’s the day we celebrate the arrival of the wise men, the Magi. But in our cute, sanitized version of the Christmas story we lose the impact of what it meant for these Parthian priests to arrive. These were the people who had driven Herod and the Romans out of Jerusalem several years before and established a new King of the Jews. Herod had fled to Rome and it took three years to recapture the city for the Romans. So when this group of king-makers arrives and comes into Herod’s palace declaring that they are looking for the new king of the Jews, Herod is quite upset, as you can imagine.

The message for us this morning, though, is this. When God interrupted Daniel’s young life it must have seemed like a tragedy. All of his plans for the future went out the window. But God was with him. God allowed Daniel to be successful in his new land. Were there bumps in the road? Absolutely. He spent a night with hungry lions. But God was with him. Looking back we have the advantage of seeing that Daniel being taken captive led to the visit of the wise men to baby Jesus who is “God with us” for all of us.

God was with Moses in the wilderness. He was with David facing Goliath. Now God is with each one of us, no matter what we’re going through. That’s the message of the Lord’s Supper, which we are about to celebrate. The bread and the juice remind us that God is with us. He became one of us. He suffered with us and he suffered for us. No matter what you’re going through today, know that Jesus understands and that he is with you.

At the very end of Matthew’s gospel, just before he ascends to heaven, Jesus comes to his disciples and says, “I am with you always, to the end of the age.” That’s the promise of Communion. Some of us have been through some tough times. Some of us are going through difficult things right now. Some of us still have hardships and unexpected turns ahead of us. But God is with you. If you’ve never experienced the presence of Jesus in your life, I want to invite you, as we celebrate the Lord’s Supper together, to take this opportunity to put your trust in him. Just say this little prayer, “Jesus, help me to trust in you. Help me to see that you are with me. Help me to know that you have a plan for my life.”

Amen.