

“Unplanned”

Luke 1:26-38

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Rev. Charles S. Blackshear • December 10, 2023

When you were young, what did you want to be when you grew up? It's often interesting to ask young children what they want to be. They have a unique perspective on the world. When you were a kid did you want to grow up to be a fireman or policeman or the mailman? What about an astronaut or a rock star? As young children we based those desires on the people we saw working in our world, which is why you don't hear kids say they want to grow up to be things like insurance adjusters. Don't get me wrong. We need insurance adjusters. But that's not what kids think about becoming.

As you get older, though, you are introduced to lots more possible career choices. And then at some point you actually make choices about your future. What kind of education and training will I need? Will I go to college or technical school? Where will I live? Will I get married? And so most of us make plans for what we want our life to be like in the future. But you know, for many of us life doesn't always turn out the way we planned. Sometimes it's because we screw up. Sometimes we change our minds. And sometimes it's because God interrupts.

This Advent season we are looking at the three encounters people have with angels in Luke's version of the birth of Jesus. "In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!'" In Christian history this has become known as "the Annunciation," and it has been the subject of many paintings over the years, particularly during the Renaissance. In those paintings Mary is usually portrayed as very serene, even joyful. In several of the paintings the angel Gabriel is shown kneeling before Mary. One author recently wrote that Mary here is showing "boldness, grit, and ringing convictions about justice."

Maybe that describes Mary later on in the story, but at this point she's scared to death. Verse 29 says she was "*greatly* troubled" by the angel's greeting. In fact, the word in Greek means that she was terrified throughout her whole body. As we talked about last week, every time someone in the Bible has an encounter with an angel, the angel has to say, "Do not be afraid." The angel then tells her that she is going to have a baby and that this baby is actually the long-promised Messiah.

I imagine Mary's thinking, "Oh thank goodness. I don't have to be afraid because I'm going to have a ... wait, what???" This doesn't sound like good news. Scholars say Mary was probably about 14 or 15 at the time. She had plans for her life. She was engaged to a nice man named Joseph who was a contractor and had his own construction business. They lived near each other in a small town where *everyone* knew *everybody's* business. You can almost hear her thinking, "A baby? This is what God's favor means? No way. This is not how it's supposed to work. I'm a good girl. I've obeyed all the rules. I know how my life is supposed to go. This is not part of my plans. Now Joseph will probably call off the wedding and I could even be stoned for this, which might be just as well because my life will pretty much be over anyway."

Have you ever found yourself in a similar situation? Your plans, your dreams, seem to be out the window. It feels like you're being punished for something. Maybe you even cried out to God, "What did I do to deserve this? My life will never be the same." The first thing we can learn here is that God's interruption comes as a surprise. Zechariah and his wife Elizabeth had been praying for years to have a child. By the time the angel appears to him in the Temple they had given up expecting their prayers to be answered. But they kept praying the same prayer. It had become part of their identity. So it's ironic that after all those years of asking God for a child, when the angel appears to this

person whose primary job is prayer and says, “your prayer is answered,” Zechariah is surprised that God hears his prayers. I find I’m the same way. No matter how much I pray about something I seem to always be surprised when God answers that prayer. God works in his own ways and his own time and so we get used to the way things are and don’t really expect things to change, even though we keep praying about them.

The second thing for us to see this morning is that God’s interruption always means some kind of loss. Jesus went around saying that those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for his sake will save it. When God interrupts, you will end up losing the life you have so carefully created. Mary would lose the life she had planned. Craig Barnes, one of my seminary professors, writes, “Christianity is fundamentally an experience in losing the lives of our dreams in order to receive the lives Jesus died to give us.” According to the New Testament, this loss is good news. It means “the Lord is with you.”

That leads us to the third thing we need to learn this morning. When God interrupts he doesn’t leave us alone. He puts others in our life who can help. When Mary’s world seemed to be spinning out of control, the angel told her that her cousin, Elizabeth, was also pregnant. Mary would not go through this alone. She would have support from family. She could trust that God was already at work to make things work out. Nothing is impossible with God. When God interrupts your life, you can take comfort knowing that he has also arranged for your support. That’s why the Church is so important. The Church is a community of interrupted lives. We come together to share how God has interrupted our life and called us to follow him. And together we discern God’s purpose.

The final thing we need to understand is that God’s interruption always has a purpose. He interrupts our lives because he wants us to participate in his mission. The Bible is filled with stories of God interrupting peoples’ lives and

inviting them to a much greater adventure. God interrupted Moses, who had settled into a nice life herding sheep in the middle of nowhere. God called him to go to Pharaoh and set the Hebrews free from slavery. God interrupted Abraham’s life in Ur when he called him to leave there and go to the Promised Land. He interrupted Daniel’s life when he was taken into captivity in Babylon. Many scholars believe that it was because of Daniel’s teaching and writing hundreds of years before that prepared the wise men to come see the baby Jesus. Jesus interrupted Peter and Andrew and James and John when he called them to leave their fishing business to become apprentices and he interrupted Paul on the road to Damascus. Every time God interrupts lives it’s because he wants to use them. It’s the same for you and me.

When Jesus calls you to be his disciple, he is calling you to give up your plans, your desires, your dreams in order to follow him. This is not a one-time call. It’s a daily choice to either follow Jesus out of your comfortable life or not. But making that choice each day, sometimes each moment, is how your faith grows. That’s one of the reasons that tithing is such an important concept for Christians. Stepping out of your comfortable, known world and onto the unknown path forces you to trust Jesus, who is already there on that path.

Zechariah and Elizabeth learned to trust God. Mary trusted God. When the angel finished telling her the news Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” Later during her visit to Elizabeth’s house she came to see this interruption as a great blessing. She even ended up writing a powerful song about it. Zechariah wrote a song. Paul wrote nearly half of the New Testament.

What does God’s favor look like in your life? My challenge to you this Advent and Christmas season is to think about how God has interrupted your life. How did you respond? How are you responding now? When God interrupts it’s always surprising and terrifying

and will mean giving up something you hold dear. But it's God's favor. So it also comes with a mission, a job for you to do. What is it that God wants you to do? Where does he want you to trust him more? Remember, God's interruption always comes with the promise that he is right there with you and that nothing is impossible with God.

Amen.