

The interruption of an unexpected journey

Matthew 2:1-12; Luke 2:1-5; Micah 5

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As if they didn't have enough to worry about. There was the unexpected pregnancy that happened during betrothal. They'd seen the scorn and endured the silent treatment. They planned to just ride it out until the wedding day. But now soldiers came with an announcement from the emperor. "Everyone must return to his hometown to register so that you could be taxed." Wow, that's a fun reason to go on a trip. Make a journey so they can know who you are, how much you own and how much they can tax.

On top of this required trip, she was 8 months pregnant. The journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem was 100 km by foot. They needed to cross rugged terrain. It would take several days. They might find no place to stay. Why couldn't they have just stayed in Nazareth? Why did Joseph and Mary have to go to Bethlehem?

Because that's where God wanted them. God "interrupted" their lives to move them where they needed to be. It was all part of God's bigger plan. Sometimes God does the same with us. **He interrupts our lives to move us where He wants us.** You might have experienced, be experiencing or are about to experience something in your life that you see as an interruption. But it might be exactly what God has in mind to move you to where He wants you to be or to where He wants you to learn.

To explore this way God works, I want you to see first why it was necessary for God to move Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem. We'll think a little more about how God might do this in our lives. Finally, we'll look at some wisdom for adjusting to God's interruptions from someone who has dealt with a life-long interruption. The text we'll start with is Matthew 2:1-12 which provides several reasons why God moved Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

Matthew 2:1-12, ESV

2 Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, wise men from the east came to Jerusalem, 2 saying, "Where is he who has been born king of the Jews? For we saw his star when it rose and have come to worship him." 3 When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him; 4 and assembling all the chief priests and scribes of the people, he inquired of them where the Christ was to be born. 5 They told him, "In Bethlehem of Judea, for so it is written by the prophet:

6 "And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah, are by no means least among the rulers of Judah; for from you shall come a ruler who will shepherd my people Israel."

7 Then Herod summoned the wise men secretly and ascertained from them what time the star had appeared. 8 And he sent them to Bethlehem, saying, "Go and search diligently for the child, and when you have found him, bring me

word, that I too may come and worship him.” **9** After listening to the king, they went on their way. And behold, the star that they had seen when it rose went before them until it came to rest over the place where the child was. **10** When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. **11** And going into the house they saw the child with Mary his mother, and they fell down and worshiped him. Then, opening their treasures, they offered him gifts, gold and frankincense and myrrh. **12** And being warned in a dream not to return to Herod, they departed to their own country by another way.

Why did God move Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem?

Reason 1 – To emphasize Jesus’ royalty and relationship to the line of David. The Jews expected a deliverer from David’s line. They anticipated a Messiah from his descendants to rise up and bring them freedom. One way to fulfill this expectation was to be born in Bethlehem. The Old Testament identifies it as David’s home town in the David and Goliath account.

1 Samuel 17:12-15

Now David was the son of an Ephrathite of Bethlehem in Judah, named Jesse, who had eight sons. In the days of Saul the man was already old and advanced in years. **13** The three oldest sons of Jesse had followed Saul to the battle. And the names of his three sons who went to the battle were Eliab the firstborn, and next to him Abinadab, and the third Shammah. **14** David was the youngest. The three eldest followed Saul, **15** but David went back and forth from Saul to feed his father's sheep at Bethlehem.

You know the story of David striking down Goliath. When David rises to become king, his hometown of Bethlehem gains the title “city of David.” So if the Messiah was to come from the line of David, how appropriate for him to be born in the city of David. The Gospel writer Luke emphasizes this to us in Luke 2:1-5.

Luke 2:1-5

In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. **2** This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. **3** And all went to be registered, each to his own town. **4** And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, **5** to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child.

So the Lord uses the decree of Caesar to move Joseph and Mary down to Bethlehem so Jesus would be born in the city of David. But there’s another reason Jesus had to be born in Bethlehem.

Reason #2 - To fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2

The wise men arrive in Jerusalem searching for the one born king of the Jews. After all, Jerusalem was the capital city of the Jews and any future king is likely to be born into a royal family that lived in Jerusalem. But Herod, the

current king of the Jews, reacts with alarm to the wise men inquiry. No child has been born in the palaces. So who could this child be that threatened his reign? Herod summons the chief priests and scribes for their expertise on the birthplace of this expected king or deliverer. They answer “In Bethlehem of Judah.” But they don’t say “in Bethlehem because David was born there.” They point to the Old Testament prophet Micah 5:2.

The prophecy in Micah says “But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days.” So these scholars found the prophecy. Matthew adapts it a little to the new reality –

6 ““And you, O Bethlehem, in the land of Judah,
are by no means least among the rulers of Judah;
for from you shall come a ruler
who will shepherd my people Israel.””

By Matthew’s time, baby Jesus’ birth already fulfilled the prophecy. So Bethlehem is no longer least among the clans of Judah. Out of her came the ultimate deliverer in Jesus. Jesus needed to be born in Bethlehem to fulfill this prophecy.

The Micah prophecy points us to another reason why Jesus needed to be born in Bethlehem? **Reason 3 - It was not Jerusalem – Micah 5:1**

This one is also found in Micah 5. Let’s read verses 1 and 2.

Micah 5:1-2, ESV

Now muster your troops, O daughter of troops;
siege is laid against us;
with a rod they strike the judge of Israel
on the cheek.

2 But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah,
who are too little to be among the clans of Judah,
from you shall come forth for me
one who is to be ruler in Israel,
whose coming forth is from of old,
from ancient days.

What is the first verse talking about? In Micah 4, the prophet has laid out God’s case against Jerusalem. Its citizens ignored God and only went through the motions of religious ritual. They’re hearts were far from Him. So God

would bring judgment by allowing them to be conquered by an invader. In Micah 5:1, we see a sarcastic taunt of the citizens of Jerusalem attempting to withstand the siege.

Jerusalem will muster or gather her troops. But they cannot withstand. They will be conquered because the judge of Israel will be struck on his cheek with a rod. Cities that successfully withstood sieges did not have their judges or leaders struck on the cheek with a rod. This was a sign of ultimate defeat which would happen to Jerusalem.

But there's still hope because of the ruler to be born in Bethlehem. But you, O Bethlehem, though you are little among the clans of Judah, out of you will come forth one who is to be a ruler in Israel. So out of Bethlehem would come the ruler – not Jerusalem.

Think about what God communicated through this in Joseph and Mary's time. The spiritual and political power lay in Jerusalem. It was the center for worldwide Jewish worship. King Herod ruled Judea from Jerusalem. If there was to be a new king of the Jews, he must surely be born in the palace in Jerusalem near all the power. But God rejects these human expectations. Instead, the king of kings will be born in the little town of Bethlehem just a few kilometers away from Jerusalem but far enough away to ensure Jesus was not seen as a royal, political or religious insider.

God interrupted Joseph and Mary's lives to move them to Bethlehem so Jesus would be born in the city of David, fulfill the prophecy of Micah 5:2, not be born in Jerusalem. One final reason – **Reason #4 – So the wise men could find him and worship him.** When the wise men came and asked in Jerusalem where the king was to be born, the scholars would not have sent them to Nazareth. There was no prophecy this clear about a ruler coming out of that northern Galilee town. So the wise men come and are sent to Bethlehem. They find baby Jesus and present him and his parents with gold, frankincense and myrrh bowing down to worship him. This fulfilled another prophecy from Psalm 72:10-11 – “May the kings of Tarshish and of the coastlands render him tribute; may the kings of Sheba and Seba bring gifts. May all kings fall down before him, all nations serve him.” With those gifts, Joseph, Mary and baby Jesus will have the means to survive on their flight to Egypt when Herod discovers the wise men have not returned.

God interrupted Mary and Joseph's lives to move them to where He wanted them. And God did this in some other Biblical accounts. Some of you may know the story of Joseph, the favorite son of his father Jacob. He looked forward to a life of privilege. But his brothers sold him into slavery and he was taken to Egypt. Joseph began as a slave in an Egyptian household. He worked himself up to be house manager. But then he was falsely accused and convicted.

So he was sent to prison. There he worked himself up to manage the prisoners. Until one day, Pharaoh needed a dream interpreter and a national manager. He hires Joseph who becomes second in command. Joseph eventually saves his father and surviving brothers from starvation. Joseph's unexpected journey turned out to be God's move so Joseph could save others - the 12 tribes of Israel.

In the New Testament, the apostle Paul did great missionary work in Asia especially in the area we now know as Turkey. He and his companions are convinced they needed to go deeper into Asia with the Gospel message. But the book of Acts tells us the Holy Spirit prevented them from going. Then Paul has a dream of a man calling Paul to come over to Europe. He follows this dream bringing the Gospel to a new continent. God moved Paul to where he needed to be for what God had next for him.

Sometimes God interrupts our lives to move us to the place where He wants us. Maybe he wants us to move to a different job – so he closes doors until we see the only one still open. Maybe he brings a pause in life – where we're in between jobs. He brings that time because He has something He wants us to face or deal with or get over. Maybe He wants us to move to a different geographical location to accomplish some good works He has prepared for us to do. Or maybe he wants to move us to different life circumstances – a child with unique needs that he wants us to care for; an illness he wants us to experience so we grow in empathy or rediscover what's most important in life or to gain freedom from something that has plagued us. Interruptions, from our perspective, might be the next step from God's perspective.

But how do we adjust to interruptions? How can we go on not knowing God's greater plan? With questions like this, I turn to Joni Eareckson for counsel. She was a healthy 17 year old looking forward to an active and fulfilled life. Then in a diving accident she broke her neck – no use of her legs – limited use of arms – in need of constant assistance – lives in a wheelchair. That's what I call a serious life interruption.

Joni writes this: Suppose you're walking down a street when you are accosted and forced to carry a huge and heavy basket on your back. You're ordered to walk three blocks, turn left, go two blocks, turn right, then proceed straight on. Staggering under the weight, you stumble on, bewildered and angry. The whole thing is meaningless and haphazard. When you are halfway down the third block, you finally bellow, "What gives?!"

The truth is then revealed. The burden you are carrying is your child, injured and unconscious. "What!" On top of that, you discover you are not trudging through a meaningless rat-maze, but the most direct route to a hospital emergency room.

Immediately you straighten. Adrenaline and fresh energy quicken your pace and you move forward with a new attitude. Why the change? The suffering you're going through involves a relationship. Not just any relationship, but one with your child. Your relationship gives your burden meaning. Even your twisted path makes sense. You know where you are going. Your journey has a positive end -- the hospital -- and this instills hope. Suffering has no meaning in itself. Left to its own, it is a frustrating and bewildering burden. But given the context of relationship, suffering suddenly has meaning.

When God brings a change or allows an interruption in our lives, we must remember it is not meaningless. It happens in the context of a relationship with God. He is sovereign and involved and watching over and caring.

Joni also tells this story - A friend of mine who suffers from migraine headaches tells me that on some mornings she wakes up thinking, How can I do this? I don't have the will to even get out of bed. Lord, help me just make it to the shower. On days like this, she says she's doing great if she can make it to lunch time without collapsing back in bed from pain.

When you're hurting, life is lived in steps. Very small steps. Though sufficiency of Christ is more than enough to meet the needs of a lifetime, life can only be lived one day, one moment, at a time.

This is why *"Since we live by the Spirit, let us keep in step with the Spirit."* is one of my friend's favorites. Especially the part about keeping *"in step with the Spirit."* It's not about keeping pace, as if the Spirit were racing ahead and we'd better keep up with Him; it has to do with measuring one's moments in a slow and circumspect way. God's strength is available one day at a time (Lamentations 3:22-23). And frankly, when you're suffering like my friend, you are only able to take one day at a time -- often, one hour at a time.

Contentment comes from many great and small acceptances in life. What is there in your life right now that is slowing you down? What's interrupting your plans? Can you thank God for it, knowing that it makes you gear down to a slower speed? Discontented people always rush ahead to escape the 'now' of their circumstances. The environment in

which to learn how to be content is the environment of moments and small steps. When life isn't the way you like it, like it the way it is one day, one hour at a time... with Christ. And you will be blessed."

Then she writes this – "There's an old saying that goes, 'A contented man is the one who enjoys the scenery along the detours.' We usually think of detours as interruptions in an otherwise well-charted path. True, detours can be viewed as problems which slow us down. However, sometimes the detour doesn't involve problems, but people. In order to build contentment, God places people in our path; but God never considers people as interruptions.

For instance, my 84-year-old mother once came to California to visit Ken and me. Arthritis and a heart condition had shortened my mother's stride, so I set aside all the deadlines, the demanding appointments, and the commitments screaming for my undivided attention in order to keep in step with her. She wasn't an interruption; she was more important than all my commitments stacked together.

For those few weeks, I was on a "detour." But I enjoyed the scenery along the way. That said something for me! I live with my wheelchair in high gear. Over those weeks, I measured my days more slowly. The secret of being content is to take one day at a time. Not five years or ten, but one day. Like the manna that fell fresh from heaven each morning, God supplies the needs of his children with the dawning of each day. "... *his compassions never fail. They are new every morning; great is your faithfulness*" (Lamentations 3:23). "Contentment is not the fulfillment of what you want, but the realization of how much you already have. It is realizing that God has already given me everything I need for my present happiness."

This remains true even in life's interruptions. In the strangest, pain-filled and unexpected places, God is there. He oversees it all. He will accomplish His purposes. Look for what He is doing. Trust Him when you don't understand. Look at Mary and Joseph's story.

Maybe God's gift for you this Christmas is a reinterpretation of some of the events in your lives – not just as something bad, upsetting, unexpected or poor. But something that needed to happen so that God could do His work. Maybe you can think about something that is different today in your life or someone's life that would not have been different if that move didn't happen or that change didn't occur.

God offers Himself to you as a means to find contentment in the midst of some unwanted situation in your life.

You don't want that thing in your life or that situation but it's there and you can't get rid of it. So now you need to give it to Him and walk day by day entrusting it to Him.

If you don't know this God, He offers Himself to you this Christmas. You may have been like Herod, the chief priests and the citizens of Bethlehem who missed Jesus' coming for years. But now you're eyes are wide open. Will you receive Jesus now as your Savior and Lord?

As if Mary and Joseph needed a trip to Bethlehem on top of everything else they faced. God knew that's exactly what was needed and He ensured they got there. Let's give Him glory for His sovereign wisdom and glorious plans that brought us life.