

## **The interruption of an unexpected pregnancy**

Luke 1:26-38

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Ready or not, the Christmas season is here. You have no choice about whether or not it comes. You cannot control the advance of time. You cannot prevent Christmas from coming in 24 days. So are you ready? Well, it depends on what we mean by ready. What would have to be in place for you to feel ready for Christmas?

Would having your Christmas cards written or family photo produced mean you're ready? Would a cleaned house and a cleared calendar help? What if you're gifts were already wrapped or purchased or you at least had an idea of what to get for gifts? Maybe you would feel ready if you've worked out this entire year in preparation for the December marathon.

Or maybe there's a truckload of work that needs to be done between now and Christmas. So if you got your papers done, projects finished and exams written, would you feel ready? I remember in University and Seminary barely having time to think about Christmas the first half of December. Sometimes exams went up to Dec 22 or 23. So I would pull off the half hour Christmas shopping trip on December 24 to get some gifts.

December and Christmas come along and basically interrupt our normal routines. We do lots of things in December that we don't do any other time of the year. December can also be the most stressful time of the year for some.

How prepared or unprepared do you feel for Christmas? Well, you're more prepared than the participants of that first Christmas. At least you know Christmas is coming. Had Mary gotten a nursery ready for the arrival of the baby? Had Joseph googled the route from Nazareth to Bethlehem and booked a hotel on some travel website? Had the shepherds inserted "visit a baby in Bethlehem manger on so and so date" into their calendars so they could have their flocks in the right fields to accommodate this appointment?

No. The first Christmas was a huge interruption to its participants. The course of several lives changed dramatically because of it. But it was no interruption from God's perspective. God had been at work bringing things together so this plan could be carried out.

When the time was right, He interrupted the lives of all the necessary participants to involve them in what He was doing. God interrupted people's lives throughout the Bible to call them into His purposes. He interrupted Sarah's retirement with news that she would be pregnant at 90. He interrupted Moses' career path to Egyptian royalty and

replaced it with redeeming slaves. He interrupted David's shepherding so he could slay a giant. He interrupted Paul's persecution of Christians to transform him into a chief missionary for Christians.

He does the same with us at times. If you think back over your life, you might remember when something you didn't plan came along. It changed the course of your life. That may have been God's interruption to direct you along the course He desires you to go. He continues to do that today. Things come along in our lives that we do not expect, plan for, anticipate or dream of. We may swirl around for awhile trying to escape, resist, overcome or change them. But perhaps some of these so-called interruptions were actually God's intervention to direct your life in a way He wants it to go.

This Christmas, we're going to consider our interrupting God. We're going to look at Him through the Christmas story from the Bible. We'll see what God did to interrupt people's lives. We'll see how He helped them adjust to unexpected change that He brought upon them. We'll see what He accomplished through them and how they responded. I hope and pray this will help all of us examine our lives now or prepare us better for God's interruptions and enable us to see how we can respond to what God calls us to.

The first interruption we'll look at was a doozy. Talk about turning someone's life upside down. One day an ordinary girl lived in a no name town expecting an ordinary life. God's interruption led her to become perhaps the most famous woman in the world today. Listen to how God interrupted her life.

Luke 1:26-38, ESV

### **Birth of Jesus Foretold**

**26** In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, **27** to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. **28** And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" **29** But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. **30** And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. **31** And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. **32** He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, **33** and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

**34** And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"

**35** And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. **36** And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called

barren. **37** For nothing will be impossible with God.” **38** And Mary said, “Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.” And the angel departed from her.

Mary was probably 12 or 13 years old. In our world, she would be in Junior High School. She would have 5 to 6 years of schooling left and then might go on to college or university. If Mary lived today, marriage would likely be at least 10 years away. She would have a lot to do and accomplish and experience before she would enter into something like that.

But in the first century in small Jewish villages like Nazareth, girls did not go to school. The poverty in the villages required families to try to get their daughters married off at this young age. That way, the family could receive a dowry or payment for the bride that would help them survive. And it would mean one less mouth to feed. The daughter would be fed by her husband to be. Marriages were often arranged and a young man’s parents would approach a bride’s parents for discussions. So the bride to be and groom might first meet at the betrothal ceremony or at least they might first meet as a couple at that ceremony. Girls, can you imagine at the age of 12 or 13 being told who you were going to marry?

The betrothal period lasted about a year. During that time the couple was considered legally married. This time frame allowed the groom to prepare a house for his new bride.

They were to have no physical relationship during their betrothal. This would ensure she was not pregnant by another. The penalty for pregnancy during a betrothal was at minimum divorce and shame upon the girl and her family. There was also a provision in the law that allowed for the stoning or execution of a woman who became pregnant while betrothed. If all was well, when the wedding day came, he would bring her into the house he’d prepared.

Well Mary has already gone through a betrothal ceremony. We don’t know how much she knew of Joseph prior to betrothal. But we do know Joseph was a descendent of King David. Their families lived in a little village called Nazareth way up in north western Israel. It was far removed from the capital city of Jerusalem.

Mary likely expected a hard life of just trying to survive. The land, after all, was ruled and occupied by the Romans. They taxed the people. Then there was King Herod who ruled under the Romans but over the people. He too taxed the people mostly so he could build great palaces with waterfalls and pools. This taxation did not allow the peasants to advance much in life. So they were caught in this cycle of survival and hoping to earn enough and make

enough to feed their families for another season. The local rabbi would remind them of their hope for a Messiah – a deliverer of some sort who would restore their nation and bring them back to something like the golden days of David.

So Mary may have looked forward with the joy and anticipation of youth who are wonderfully naïve to some of the hard realities of life. She maybe looked forward to becoming a mom and having kids and running a house. She likely anticipated a life not much different than she had grown up with.

But one day, the Lord’s angel Gabriel comes to visit her. Gabriel, who stood in the presence of God is sent to this obscure village to visit an ordinary girl. We don’t really know what he looked like. We know from earlier verses that when Mary’s relative Zechariah saw Gabriel, he was afraid. Perhaps there was something awesome and a little scary about his appearance.

Mary hears these words – “Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!” Now there’s nothing in this greeting about Mary being an extra-ordinary person or that she has some measure of grace greater than anyone else. She is actually a recipient of favor. Gabriel communicates that God favors her and that the Lord is with her.

Now I don’t know about you. But if an angel came to visit me and told me “God was showing me favor and was with me,” I would find that encouraging. I might be awestruck but I think I’d really appreciate it. But Mary is troubled. She’s not only troubled. She’s greatly troubled and tries to discern what sort of greeting this might be.

Why was she troubled? Amidst many possible explanations, it seems most likely she was just so ordinary. She was one young Jewish girl among thousands. She was like all of them as they carried on their lives in other little known villages in other parts of the country. She was certainly no princess. She and her family had no wealth. She had no power. She had no education or degrees to point to. She was just a girl in the most humble of circumstances. She is favored by God. She is sent a messenger from God who reassures her that the Lord is with her. No one had likely ever been visited like that in her family’s history. Why her? Perhaps this explains her troubled heart.

Gabriel senses Mary’s discomfort. So he responds to it with reassurance. “Don’t be afraid Mary, for you have found favor with God.” God is about to bring a serious interruption into Mary’s life. But even as He’s doing it, He comforts and assures her.

She’ll need it for the biggest news is about to be unveiled. “And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus.” Mary is going to have a baby boy. She will give to him the name Jesus. At

this point there's not much surprise in this announcement. Mary is already betrothed. She anticipates having a family with Joseph. And the name Jesus – it was a very common one in those days. It reminded of the Hebrew Jeshua or Joshua – the Lord is salvation. Her people certainly needed salvation.

But Gabriel's next words reveal this would be no ordinary child. "He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Son of the Most High was a divine title reserved for a Son of God. A king who reigns forever could only be divine. The rabbis promised that one day a deliverer would arise from the house of David. But did they understand that those Old Testament prophecies were not about a human king but one who would come from God Himself? Mary would bear the deliverer her family hoped for. Mary would give birth to the messiah that her forefathers anticipated. Little Mary from unknown Nazareth would bring forth a son who would become the nation's deliverer. God was doing an amazing work. God was fulfilling the prophecies of the Old Testament. The Lord was coming for His people!

But as is often the case when God interrupts one's life, some major adjustments would be necessary for Mary to willingly embrace this plan. Somehow, she realizes that Gabriel is not talking about a baby coming from her pending marriage with Joseph. She is going to be pregnant soon. Though she is only 12 or 13 years old, her mother has explained to her the facts of life. She has never been with a man. How can Gabriel's words be true since she is a virgin?

Gabriel answers with reverence, dignity and holiness. "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God." God would show his power over human reproduction. It would be a most holy event. There is no inkling of some crude Holy Spirit mating with Mary like the pagan stories. God would overshadow and perform an incredible miracle.

But again, Gabriel not only provides information. He, on the Lord's behalf, brings further assurance and comfort. "And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren." Gabriel announces that God has already demonstrated His sovereignty over human reproduction in the life of Mary's relative Elizabeth. He assures her that God could do what He said He would do. Then Gabriel concludes by declaring one of the most reassuring verses in all of Scripture – "For nothing will be impossible with

God.” When God decides on a course of action, nothing will be impossible for Him. Nothing stands in His way that cannot be overcome. Nothing frustrates His plans so He has to go to plan B.

So Mary began that day an ordinary betrothed girl in an unknown village looking forward to a hard with some happiness life. She’s now been informed by God that she is favored and will bear a son through God’s miraculous work. This Son will be Israel and the world’s deliverer.

This interruption would require major adjustments in her life.

She would likely experience confusion and tension with Joseph. When he found out about her pregnancy he resolved to divorce her quietly. This interruption would require her to make a long difficult journey in the late stages of her pregnancy and give birth without her mother and other midwives of the community. She would get visited by kings from the east. She and Joseph would be forced to flee into the desert and go down to Egypt. Eventually she would return to Israel and go back to her village with Joseph and the child. She would experience 3 days without Jesus when he was 12 wondering what came of him. She would have to adjust to the death of her husband and the public ministry of her son where he was away for long periods of time. She would at times feel he was overwhelmed and try to get at him through the crowds. She would see his punishment, crucifixion and death. And then she would see her resurrected Son and be there for his ascension into heaven. The course of her life would change forever after this visit from Gabriel. Though there must have been times of struggle, at this moment she responds with great faith. “I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word.” And Gabriel departed.

What about you and me? None of us has to go through what Mary experienced. But we have to live our lives and deal with God’s interruptions. How has that been going in your life? How well have you been listening to and looking for what God wants you to do? On your message insert is a little diagram that might help us get a better grasp of this. It’s from *Experiencing God* by Henry Blackaby. He wrote this to help others know and join in doing God’s will. The top of the picture depicts God in the cloud. From God, the arrow shows that He’s always doing His work. But He invites us to be part of it. He pursues a loving relationship with us. He showed us this by sending Jesus on the cross and continues to pursue us today with love. He invites us to become involved in what He is doing.

We have to make ourselves available to learn about God’s work. We can hear from Him through the Bible, prayer, circumstances and the church. Mary heard from God through a direct messenger like Gabriel. But God may

speak to us through a Bible passage or during prayer or through a circumstance that we just cannot get out of or through others in the church who seek and discern from the Lord.

When we hear God speak, we face what Blackaby calls a crisis of belief. Will we take up His invitation? Will we obey His call? Will we accept His interruption and adjust our lives to join Him in what He is doing. If we are willing to make those adjustments like Mary, we will know God more deeply through obedience and His work.

Some people never discover God's invitation because they don't give time to the relationship. Others never slow down long enough to actually listen to God and look around for His interruptions. Some understand what God says and where He calls. But they don't want to go. So they circle around and around a crisis of belief maybe for years. But others cry out to God for help to accept this interruption. They begin the process of adjusting and obeying His call. Then they experience the Lord through obedience and His work.

Christmas is coming. We may not be ready by our definition. But maybe this Christmas season we can more intentionally listen to God, look around for His interruptions and begin that journey of belief, adjustment and obedience.