

## “Holy Interruptions”

“And [Gabriel] came and said to her, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’”

Interruptions are a fact of life; but not all interruptions are the same. There are the petty, everyday nuisances like phone calls during dinner, or a knock on the door while you are cooking, or a text message that pings during an important meeting. Some interruptions arrive as unexpected good news: a birth notice that arrives in the mail, or word that a family member is engaged to be married, or a surprise visit from a friend (which we can look forward to again once the pandemic has run its course). Other interruptions can have devastating, long term consequences: suffering a heart attack, finding out you have cancer, or the word that a loved one has died. Interruptions can be a momentary interruption or a life-altering experience.

The interruption that Mary experiences in today’s Gospel lesson altered not only her life but has had a lasting impact on the lives of generations of God’s people. It is an interruption whose source was neither Mary nor the angel Gabriel, but the gracious God of Israel, the story of the further unfolding of God’s design for the salvation of all humanity. Luke tells us little about the background of Mary or why she was chosen to be the mother of the child who “*will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.*” (1:33). We know that she lives in “*a town of Galilee called Nazareth*” in the north of modern-day Israel, and that she was “*engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David.*” While we know her as Mary, in her time she was probably known by her Hebrew name Miriam, a popular name at the time whose origins were in the sister of Moses and Aaron in Exodus, the prophet who led the women of Israel in triumphant song:

- “Then Miriam, the prophetess, the sister of Aaron, took the timbrel in her hand, and all the women went out after her with timbrels and with dances. And Miriam answered them: ‘Sing to the LORD, for he has triumphed gloriously! The horse and its rider he has thrown into the sea.’” (Exodus 15:20-21).

The everyday life of Miriam of Nazareth would have been like the lives of young Jewish women of her time, including those who were engaged to be married and were preparing for a life with her husband and children, surrounded by family and friends who had continued these customs and traditions for generations:

- “Miriam of Nazareth, rooted and nurtured within the traditions of the old covenant, would have been taught how to keep her home kosher, how to wash pots correctly and avoid food forbidden in the Old Testament. She could patch worn garments and weave homespun wool. When Jesus says, ‘No one sews a piece of unshrunk cloth on an old garment’ (Mark 2:21), he must have been thinking of his mother mending his torn clothes in their humble home in Nazareth.” – Jenny Robertson, *Mary of Nazareth*.

The day that we know as the Annunciation to Mary probably began as an ordinary day when it was suddenly interrupted by the appearance of the angel Gabriel, who “*came and said to her, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The LORD is with you.’*” (1:28). This is Gabriel’s second appearance in Luke; he previously appeared to Zechariah with the news that “*your wife Elizabeth will bear a son, and you will name him John. You will have joy and gladness, and many will rejoice at his birth, for he will be great in the sight of the Lord.*” (1:13-15). Angelic appearances are found throughout the Old Testament, including the angel of the Lord who appeared to Hagar in the wilderness with the announcement that “*I will so greatly multiply your offspring that they cannot be counted for multitude.*” (Genesis 16:10). The words with which Gabriel greets Mary echo the words of Hannah in 1 Samuel (“*Let your servant find favour in your sight.*” – 1 Samuel 1:18) as well as the assurances of power and favour spoken to Gideon in the book of Judges (“*The angel of the LORD appeared to [Gideon] and said to him, ‘The LORD is with you, you mighty warrior.’*” – Judges 6:12).

- “Unexpectedly, suddenly, unanticipated – Gabriels appear and alter what seem to be fixed and predictable paths. But engagement between divine messengers and humankind is not a new thing.” – Courtney V. Buggs.

Luke reports that Mary’s response to the angel’s “holy interruption” is that “*she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.*” (1:29). We have the advantage of knowing what happens next in the story, but Mary does not know why the angel would interrupt the normal course of her life. Gabriel senses that she is “greatly troubled,” because his next statement includes words of comfort and reassurance: “*do not be afraid,*” words that typically begin angelic pronouncements in the Gospels:

- “Do not be afraid, Zechariah, for your prayer has been heard.” – Luke 1:13.

- “Do not be afraid; for see – I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people; to you is born this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is the Messiah, the Lord.” – Luke 2:10-11.
- “Do not be afraid; I know that you are looking for Jesus who was crucified. He is not here; for he has been raised, as he said.” – Matthew 28:5-6.

Gabriel reassures Mary that she has found favour with God, and then makes the stunning announcement that Mary is going to give birth to a son whose name will be Jesus:

- “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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” – 1:32-33.

The angel’s words echo the promises God made to David when the Lord established his covenant with the great King of Israel: “... *I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be a father to him, and he shall be a son to me.*” (2 Samuel 7:13-14).

Mary’s response is reminiscent of Zechariah’s response to Gabriel’s announcement: “*How can this be?*” Not only has Gabriel’s appearance disrupted her day, but what he is announcing will change the course of her life and place her in a potentially dangerous situation. She has already been identified as a “virgin,” and if it is discovered that she is carrying a child who is not Joseph’s the consequences could be devastating. Giving this child a name other than the father’s, which was the custom at the time, would also be met with surprise and potential consequences should she agree to submit to what the angel is announcing. In the span of a few minutes, Mary’s entire future has been thrown into chaos and jeopardy.

Gabriel’s response is to emphasize the uniqueness of this child and the unique circumstances of his conception and birth once again:

- “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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.” – 1:35-37.

The announcement of Elizabeth's joy to Mary serves as a sign to her: if Elizabeth, who had been called barren, could bear a child, then Mary could be sure that what had been told her would also come to pass. Gabriel's parting words once again proclaim the message of reassurance that "*nothing will be impossible with God,*" a message of hope proclaimed throughout Scripture:

- "The LORD said to Abraham, 'Why did Sarah laugh, and say, "Shall I indeed bear a child, now that I am old?" Is anything too wonderful for the LORD? At the set time I will return to you, in due season, and Sarah shall have a son.'" – Genesis 18:13-14.
- "Those who heard it said, 'Then who can be saved?' [Jesus] replied, 'What is impossible for mortals is possible for God.'" – Luke 18:26-27.

The focus now shifts to Mary and how she will respond to the angel's announcement. The Annunciation would not have been complete without Mary's trusting obedient response; for "*it is unthinkable that God would have forced Mary to have a child against her will.*" (Alan Culpepper). Gabriel's holy interruption has placed Mary in an unexpected position in which she must make a choice, and we could understand if she rejected what the angel was proposing, since it meant the possibility of ruining all her plans for the future she was expecting to share with Joseph. But Mary chooses the path of one who is obedient to the Lord: "*Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.*" (1:38). Mary becomes an important example of one who is obedient to God even at great risk to self:

- "Mary hears the word of God from an angel and says, 'Be it done unto me according to your word.' Thus if a disciple is one who hears the word of God and does it, Mary becomes the first Christian disciple, because she is the first one to hear the word of God and to consent wholeheartedly that it be done." – Raymond Brown.

The call to discipleship that is first answered by Mary is a call that comes as a "holy interruption," calling us to interrupt the course our lives have been following so that we might follow Jesus. As he walked along the shores of the Sea of Galilee, Jesus interrupted the fishing careers of two sets of brothers – Simon and Andrew, James and John – when he called them to "*follow me, and I will make you fish for people*" (Matthew 4:19). In response, the brothers "*immediately left their nets and followed him.*" (4:20). As Saul of Tarsus was on the road to Damascus "*so that if he found any who belonged to the Way, men or women, he might bring them bound to*

*Jerusalem*” (Acts 9:2), his murderous intentions are suddenly interrupted when “*suddenly a light from heaven flashed around him. He fell to the ground and heard a voice saying to him, ‘Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me?’*” (9:3-4). This holy interruption completely changed the direction of his journey, so that as the Apostle Paul he became the one who brought the Gospel to the ends of the known world. Martin Luther’s career path to becoming a lawyer was interrupted when he was caught in a violent storm:

- “As he approached the village, the sky became overcast. Suddenly there was a shower, then a crashing storm. A bolt of lightning rived the gloom and knocked the man to the ground. Struggling to rise, he cried in terror, ‘St. Anne help me! I will become a monk.’” – Roland Bainton.

Luther’s path to the monastery led him to Wittenberg, where his posting of the 95 Theses on October 31, 1517 changed the course of Western Christianity and led to the establishment of our Lutheran Church and a theology that is rooted in Luther’s commitment to the good news of God’s gracious love for us in Jesus Christ. For generations of people who have experienced these holy interruptions, these seminal moments have affected the course of their lives and the lives of many who were influenced by their teachings and example.

- “When Christ calls a man, he bids him come and die. It may be a death like that of the first disciples who had to leave home and work to follow him, or it may be a death like Luther’s, who had to leave the monastery and go out into the world. But it is the same death every time – death in Jesus Christ, the death of the old man at his call ... The call to discipleship, the baptism in the name of Jesus means both death and life. The call of Christ, his baptism, sets the Christian in the middle of the daily arena against sin and the devil. Every day he encounters new temptations, and every day he must suffer anew for Jesus Christ’s sake.” – Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

This year has presented us with an interruption the likes of which we have never experienced. COVID-19 disrupted every area of our lives: we have been separated from family and friends, restricted from many of the normal daily activities of our lives, prevented from traveling freely, unable to shake a person’s hand or give someone a hug. The pandemic has interrupted our lives as the people of God throughout the world; we were unable to gather for Sunday worship for the first time in anyone’s memory, and even now our gatherings are governed by guidelines that prevent us from gathering before and after worship, singing hymns, receiving the

wine at Holy Communion, and shaking hands with one another. In this time of sudden and drastic interruption, the holy interruption that Mary experienced proclaims a message to us that even in times of disruption and uncertainty God is with us and is at work using times of holy interruption to further God's Will and preparing God's people for new ways of loving and serving in the name of the child born of Mary:

- “As we reflect on a tumultuous year – *unprecedented*, as it is so aptly referred to – may we receive the words of Gabriel to Mary as our own – God is with us. The Divine visits an unsuspecting young girl named Mary; and the Divine visits us. May the vicissitudes of life be viewed through and conditioned by this conviction – God is with us. Even as a young girl by the name of Mary was impacted by the social realities of her day, we, too, are immersed in and squeezed by the societal challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. And God is with us. Gabriels remind us, assure us, comfort us – yes, God is with us.” – Courtney Buggs.

Interruptions are a fact of life, and by their very nature they are surprising and unexpected. Interruptions can shock us in ways we cannot anticipate and change us in ways we cannot expect. Interruptions are often unwelcomed guests, yet we have no choice but to receive them and deal with the consequences of their appearance. The story of this era is still being written; none of us knows with certainty when the pandemic will end or what its long-lasting consequences will be. But the holy interruption that led Mary to become the mother of our Lord is the holy interruption in this time of darkness and uncertainty that is the word of assurance for us, God's “*good news of great joy for all the people*”: in our coming celebration of the birth of Mary's child, we have the word of holy interruption that is the word of holy joy and peace: **God is with us!**

Amen.