

“God. With. Us. Recognizing Divine Interruptions.”

Today we continue in this series entitled, “God. With. Us.” So far we’ve talked about taking Christmas back—understanding that it’s not the job of government, or public schools, or retailers to teach the Christmas story. It’s our job. Last week Mark focused why God chose the time he chose to come in human form and what that means for us. Today I’m focusing on the word “with”. What does it mean that God is with us? How was God with us? Is God still with us?

They say that there is no such thing as a stupid question. I’ve never really believed that. So let me ask you one. Did your plans get interrupted in any way last week? Did you have one idea of how your week was going to be, and then they were changed? Did you go from preparing for a Merry Christmas, to removing a giant ice-mess? Our power has been interrupted. So have our plans, our lives.

It’s kind of strange that I chose what I’m talking about today several weeks ago. It’s an important subject when it comes to spiritual life; an important subject when it comes to Christmas. That is, how do you recognize and respond to divine interruptions when they come your way? We’re going to do that today by looking at a few people whose lives were interrupted by God. And we’re going to start by looking at Mary in Luke 1:26.

It says in Luke, **“In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’ Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God.**

“You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’ ‘How will this be?’ Mary asked the angel, ‘since I am a virgin?’ The angel answered, ‘The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you.

“So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elisabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.’ ‘I am the Lord’s servant,’ Mary answered. ‘May it be to me as you have said.’ Then the angel left her” (Luke 1:26-38, NIV).

Talk about an interruption in somebody’s life! You think an ice storm is an interruption!? An angel comes to this young girl named Mary, Mary is engaged to be married.

As a general rule, anytime a girl gets engaged and is planning for her wedding it is not a good time for an interruption. Some of you have been there. Some of you are there right now. A girl buys a bride magazine. This has been an education for me this week. Do you have any idea how many bride magazines there are? I went online this week. There’s “Bride,” “Modern Bride,” “Today’s Bride,” “Elegant Bride,” “Hawaii Bride,” “Sea Island Bride,” “World Bride.”

There’s a magazine called--get this--“Bride Again Magazine” for what are called “encore brides.” I’m not making that up. They just did so good the first time, they’re called “encore brides.” These are just some of the names, of bride magazines. But let me ask you this: Have any of you ever seen a magazine called “Modern Groom”? No, because nobody cares about the groom or what the groom looks like! I did find this magazine The groom is there but off in the distance like he accidentally wandered into the shot. I like the way John Ortberg put it: A groom at a wedding is a little like restrooms in an art gallery. You have to have them, but nobody goes to look at one.

In our day when a girl gets engaged, you can tell because she walks around like this because she wants you to see the ring. For Mary there would be no ring. For Mary there were no magazines. New Testament scholars say that Mary was one of what were called the Anawim. It means “the poor ones.” Or they are sometimes called the “pious poor” or the “faithful poor.” The Anawim were the financially deprived or depressed, the lonely, the sick, the disabled, those who could not trust on their own strength and had to depend on God. We know that Mary was from this group, because when Jesus was born she couldn’t even

afford a lamb for his dedication. Mary knows about depending on God, because there is no other hope really. Finally, finally something good happens to Mary. She gets engaged.

For a young girl from the Anawim, this can mean the difference between life and death. If nobody married her, she did not have a lot of career options. Financially once her father, once her parents were no longer in the picture, she's in a very, very serious predicament if she doesn't get married.

Joseph is not rich, but he's respectable. He has an occupation. For maybe the first time in Mary's life, at least financially, at least in her circumstances things are looking up. She's engaged. She's going to get married.

Then her life is interrupted. An angel appears to her in verse 28. "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Now notice verse 29. It says that Mary is "greatly troubled," not just troubled; **greatly** troubled. Why is that?

Because this greeting, "The Lord is with you," is the kind of greeting that the angel of God would bring to someone in the Old Testament who is going to be given a difficult assignment. You see this in Judges 6:12. An angel comes to Gideon. Gideon is hiding from the Midianites and the angel says, "The Lord be with you, mighty warrior." Gideon finds out he's going to have to go up against the Midianites.

Mary knew her Old Testament and she understood immediately that there's going to be a deep challenge associated with this greeting, "The Lord is with you." The angel is saying, "Mary you're not going to have a safe, secure, quiet, predictable life you thought. The Lord is with you. God is going to interrupt your life."

God's interruptions almost always work this way. How often in the Bible does an angel interrupt somebody and say, "The Lord is with you and now your life is going to get easier and more comfortable"? You just don't see that. We often pray for that, don't we? But one of the ways that you can recognize a divine interruption is that usually it's a summons to servanthood--not convenience, not ease, not wealth or power. Usually it's a summons to servanthood. Because usually when God interrupts somebody's life he calls them to serve.

But let's hit the pause button on Mary's story and get personal and ask this question of all of us. When was the last time that you let God interrupt you? When was the last time you let God interrupt your plans or your agenda? In our world the more important somebody is the more they can insulate their life against ever being interrupted. In our world, we have answering machines to screen calls at home. Hotels give people "Do Not Disturb" signs. Office phones have little buttons on them that let you send calls right into voice mail so nobody can interrupt you. CEOs may have a whole stable of assistants to shield them.

Of course, fending off interruptions is not always a bad thing. There are some people at work or at school who love to be interrupted. They're not being spiritual. They just have a short attention span, so fending off interruptions isn't always bad.

But there's a trend in Scripture. When God is going to work in somebody's life on this earth, usually it means he has to interrupt somebody. "Abraham, I want you to leave your homeland, there's a journey to begin." "Moses, I want you to come out of the wilderness where you're safe, there's a leader to confront." "Gideon, I want you to leave your hiding place, there's an enemy to fight." This is supremely true at Christmas. Christmas is God's great interruption. God with us, to interrupt us.

Some people, Mary and Joseph, the Magi, the shepherds, they say, "Yes." Some people like Herod, Herod's got an agenda. Herod has no intent on letting God interrupt his agenda. What about you? I can get so focused on my own little agenda. It may not be a bad one, but I can get so focused on it that I insulate myself from the very thing I most desire. And I end up missing out on the adventure of partnering with God in my life.

What if what looks like an interruption in your plan is actually a part of the plan of God? What if what looks like an interruption is actually God nudging you, whispering to you to help this person or encourage this person who is discouraged? Serve a neighbor who has something they need done. Listen to somebody who's in pain even though you think you're busy.

Let's do a little exercise. I put some space on your outline to do a little assessment of "**Your IQ-- Interrupt-ability Quotient**". Here's what I'd like to ask you to do: Remember yesterday (or pick a typical day of the week from last week). From the moment you woke up on that day, write down the names of the people that you had contact with. Maybe family members, maybe a spouse, child, roommates, somebody at work, maybe somebody that served you at a restaurant where you had breakfast or lunch or dinner. It could have been a client that your work brought you into contact with. Maybe it was a telephone conversation with a friend or a relative. Go through your day and write down the names and the faces of the people that were part of your day. I give you a little time....

Now, ask yourself this question, "**How did I do at being open to God interrupting me?**" "How often did I ask, 'God, is there something you want me to say'? I'm here anyhow. Is there something you want me to notice? God, is there an act of service that I can offer to this person? God, is there a word of encouragement that I can speak to somebody whose shoulders are a little slumped? Is there some kind of gift I can give? Is there something I can do?"

This past week we hosted almost 150 people. People who lost power, had damage to their homes and could not stay in their homes. Men, women, children, all ages. We had members of the church staying here. And we've had lots of people from the church volunteer and I'm so proud of them, they showed, they stepped up, they asked me what they could do. My response, "Find a need and fill it." And they did. They served food, they cleaned toilets, and emptied trash, they visited with people, they vacuumed, they transported people to other shelters when we were full. Amazing!

All of these people had their lives interrupted, and many of the people who volunteered allowed their interruptions to be interrupted to help others! To be givers of God's light, and hope, and comfort.

Our God really is the God of the interruption and he really does, I believe, lead in these kinds of moments for all of us if we'll just pay attention! If we will engrain it on hearts and minds that we **can** be interrupted whenever God has something he needs doing.

With the ice storm and the needs that people will have, what a great time to tell God, "Forgive me if I've had blinders on, if I've not seen. But please interrupt me!" Just say, "God, I don't want to be so tunnel-visioned. I want you to interrupt me all over the place. I want it to happen today. I want it to happen tomorrow." Just tell him right now. "Father, you are the great interrupter and how we need it. We open ourselves up to it right now. Help us learn more about it now. We ask in Jesus' name. Amen."

Let's say that God really does interrupt you, that God really does guide you. Maybe he'll use an angel to do it, but probably he won't. Maybe it will be your spouse. Maybe it will be a friend or somebody that you know. Maybe it will be a need. Maybe it will be a person. Maybe it will be an ice storm. Maybe it will be a thought that comes to you of some way that you can help another person. How do you respond to divine interruption?

Here's my dilemma, maybe yours too. I want to define servanthood in my terms. I get all excited about being a servant of God, but way too often it's on my terms. If it's going to get hard emotionally or disrupt my lifestyle too much, I want to reserve the right to bail out. In theory, I'm a servant and I can be real moved by the language of servanthood, but my actions and choices sometimes tell a different story.

I think to myself, "If an **angel** came to me and told me to go to a foreign country, give up my job, make a huge sacrifice, I'd do it. I'd say yes. God, just give me a noble calling like that. Tell me what great thing you want me to do with my life, and I'll obey it. Just say the word." Then I'm at home doing what I want to do and my daughter says to me, "Dad, I need poster board for a school project. Can you take me to a store?" Where does Mr. Servant go? My wife says, "Honey, the hall light is burned out." I hear someone inside my body saying, "I think there's a flashlight in the drawer."

I think to myself, "I'll say 'yes' to some great, noble, glamorous call. Just tell me what you want me to do. Give me a 'Mother Theresa' size challenge. I'll do it God. But don't ask me to interrupt my sofa time to run an errand for a child. Don't ask me to put my book down to change a light bulb. Don't ask me to serve in small, mundane, unseen, and uncelebrated acts of everyday life."

The truth is that more often than not, divine interruptions are going to be the little things. That's where I have to work harder at being interruptible.

Now let emphasize something here: Don't fall into the trap of thinking that surrender and devotion and submission to God is going to lead to nothing but misery, you need to know that any time God interrupts and a person says, "Yes," sooner or later, somewhere down the line, it leads to joy. Always, it leads to joy.

I want to shift gears before wrapping up. I feel like I need to say that God with us, God interrupting us, isn't just about us being available to serve. That's a big part of it, but God interrupts in lots of other ways, if we let him. Jesus once met a woman who was drawing water from a well in the heat of the day. She did it at that time of day because she had been shamed by her village. At that time of day she could avoid the comments, the sneers, of others. She'd gotten a reputation as a loose woman. She'd had 5 husbands and was living with a sixth man. Her shame was palpable. She didn't know it at first, but God was with her. Jesus interrupted her shame and set her free.

I think about the group of lepers that Jesus healed. Lepers were kicked out of the village. They were forced to live in the dumps scavenging; forced to live a life of begging. They saw Jesus, cried out to him, and he had compassion on them and healed them. He interrupted their isolation. He interrupted their illness. He interrupted their pain.

A couple weeks ago I got an emergency call. A man I know was deeply struggling. Big chunks of his life were falling apart. He didn't know who he could turn to. He was despairing of life thinking his family would be better off if he was dead. That was until God interrupted him. God used a friend, and God used me. That's often how it works. God interrupted our agendas that day so that we could go and spend time with him, encouraging him, helping him to see the options, the support, that he had. This man's despair was rudely interrupted by God's amazing love, amazing hope.

You see, that God is with us, that God interrupts us, it's a big concept. And, yes, God probably wants to interrupt your agenda and have you take on the role of a servant in big and small ways, but listen carefully: God is also wanting to interrupt your shame from things in your past. Let him. God wants to interrupt your patterns of sin. Let him. God wants to interrupt your illnesses. Let him. God wants to interrupt your self-pity. Let him. God wants to interrupt your pain. Let him. God wants to interrupt your fear. Let him. God want to interrupt your unforgiveness of others. Let him. God wants to interrupt our violence. Let him. God wants to interrupt our busy-ness. Let him. God wants to interrupt your depression. Let him. God wants to interrupt your bitterness. Let him.

One name given to this Christmas child is Emmanuel. God with us. He was a divine interruption then, and he still is. Let him.

Sometime this season, take some time individually, or together with your small group and just ask where is God interrupting you? When somebody gets it right, celebrate it. Just make a commitment between now and the end of this year that you're just going to be like an interruptible machine, asking God, "What have you got for me? Interrupt me!" And for today that is the Good News. In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

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