

“Advent Surprises”

Luke 1:26-38

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Communion Devotion

Social media was buzzing last week over the announcement of another Royal Wedding. Next spring in London, Prince Harry will marry Meghan Markle, an American actress.

I suspect they will be busy the next few months. Royal weddings are never simple, and if this one is anything like William and Kate’s wedding in 2011, there is much to do to get ready.

Mary was busy, too, after she and Joseph got engaged. She was not planning a royal wedding, but she still had much to do. She had to plan the festivities and fill up her hope chest while Joseph had to build a house and the furniture that would go in it.

This is why most engagements in the first century lasted about a year. It took that long to get everything ready.

No doubt Mary and Joseph were focused on all that had to be done before their wedding when God interrupted their plans with some startling news from the angel, Gabriel. Listen to Luke’s account from his first chapter.

²⁶In the sixth month, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, ²⁷to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸The angel went to her and said, ‘Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.’

²⁹Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. ³¹You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. ³²He 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, ³³and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; his kingdom will never end.’

³⁴ *'How will this be,' Mary asked the angel, 'since I am a virgin?'*³⁵*The angel answered, 'The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. The holy one to be born will be called the Son of God.* ³⁶*Even Elizabeth 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.* ³⁷*For nothing is impossible with God.'*

³⁸ *'I am the Lord's servant,' Mary answered. 'May it be to me as you have said.'* Then the angel left her.

Why did God interrupt Mary's plans? He had other plans for her, not that her plans were bad. As a matter of fact, Mary and Joseph's decision to get married, along with their thoughtful preparation, may have convinced God this very couple, filled with grace and truth, could be trusted to provide a good home for Jesus.

How did Mary respond to this divine interruption? At first she was afraid and asked questions, as anyone would do. Ultimately, though, her words reveal the mind of an obedient and faithful disciple. "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May it be to me as you have said."

Are you surprised by Mary's response? I must be candid and tell you that I am. This kind of faith is rare, especially when the risks are high. I am deeply impressed by Mary's level of commitment to God and willingness to suspend her plans. Trading her dream for God's was in itself a Christmas miracle.

I once heard New Testament scholar, Dr. Peter Rhea Jones, make an interesting comparison between Jesus and Mary. "While Jesus is the mirror of God," he said, "Mary is the reflection of a true disciple."

This young maiden, who laid her plans aside and said yes to God, shows all of us what it means to be a person of faith. "Mary's yes is contagious," according to Dr. Jones.

There are many Advent lessons in this passage, but I wish to focus upon only one as we prepare to take communion. **Advent is about letting God interrupt us.**

Dr. Lauren Winner, professor of Christian Spirituality at Duke Divinity School, says faith is about letting God interrupt us. The traditional Christmas story is a vivid example of this. Even

the way the birth narrative is arranged in the first chapter of Luke's gospel supports Winner's perspective.

The account of John the Baptist's birth is interrupted to tell the readers about Gabriel coming to Mary with the news of her pregnancy. Just when you thought you were going to read more about Zechariah, Elizabeth and their son, Luke writes about another couple, Mary and Joseph, whose plans were going to change dramatically.

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How well do you handle interruptions? When you are busy, I suspect they frustrate you.

Many of you have attended leadership seminars and know how important it is to be organized, focused and driven. Distractions are the enemies of productivity and efficiency.

The God we serve, however, seems to be fond of interruptions. This is because God knows the needs many people have cannot wait to be met until those who can help them have marked everything off their to-do lists. This means ministry, the kind that impacts people when they need it most, occurs in the lives of busy people.

This was true for the disciples Jesus called. Early in his ministry, Jesus met two brothers, Simon and Andrew, casting a net into the sea because they were fishermen. "Come, follow me and I will make you fishers of men," Jesus said. "At once, they left their nets and followed him," Mark 1:17-18.

One of the most memorable parables Jesus told was that of the Good Samaritan. On the road from Jerusalem to Jericho a man was overtaken by thieves. He was beaten, robbed and left for dead. Two religious leaders ignored him as they walked by because they did not want to interrupt their plans. The third man that came along stopped and helped the desperate man. He cleaned and bandaged his wounds and then took him to an inn where he could receive more attention.

Did the Samaritan stop because he had nothing to do or nowhere to go? I don't think so. In the parable, Jesus said he continued on his journey, but not before telling the innkeeper he would return to settle up with him for the man's care.

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I wonder if Mary and Joseph's favorable response to God's interruption of their wedding plans inspired Jesus. Do you think their decisions shaped and molded the way he conducted his ministry? Sure they did, and I hope you will let them influence your values, priorities and lifestyle, too.

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There are two things I am reminded of each year during Advent. The first is that schedules matter because they give structure to our lives and help us to perform our many duties. The second is that surprises also matter because they remind us we are not in control and do not notice everything that is important.

In the coming days, I hope you will let God interrupt your busy life. When you feel the nudging of the Spirit, wherever you are, respond as Mary did when Gabriel came to her.

"I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said."

Think about this as we gather around this table to remember the life of one who answered God's call by setting aside his plans to make our lives better. Ask God to help you follow Jesus' example, as well as that of Mary and Joseph.