



## A Divine Interruption

Gregg Caruso // Matthew 1:18-25

### I. INTRO

- A. We enjoy having kids here in the worship Center. We don't mind if they get a bit fussy...
- B. Celebrate, The Lord's Supper today... [Pray]
- C. A few years ago, **Joshua Bell**, one of the world's premier violinists, participated in a **social experiment**. [show slide] He dressed down in jeans, a tee-shirt, and a baseball cap and took his **\$3.5m Stradivarius violin** into a Washington D.C. subway station at rush-hour and played for half an hour. In that half an hour only **seven people stopped to listen** and **1,070 walked right by**. Oh, and he collected \$32 and change...



- D. I think Advent is similar to the social experiment Joshua Bell participated in. The vast majority of people are in too big a hurry to notice the **beautiful music of the Incarnation**—Jesus Christ coming out of the perfection of heaven into a broken world to save us from our addiction to sin.
- E. I'd like to time us for **60 seconds** of silence to quiet our hearts and ask God to speak into the whirlwind that represents many of our lives and to prepare us for a deeper and richer experience of anticipating the gift of the Incarnation that is Advent...

- F. To say our lives have been interrupted this year would be a major understatement, right? As we heard, in our passage for today, what was supposed to be a **blissful betrothal**, Joseph's and Mary's lives encountered a seismic interruption when Mary became pregnant.
1. We see in the text that Joseph was a kindhearted man who, nevertheless, made the decision to quietly end their engagement until an angel showed-up in a dream.
  2. It would be easy for those of us who labor over discerning God's will to be a bit jealous of Joseph's angelic intervention. Is it possible for us to have the same access to God's wisdom and discernment in determining God's will for our lives? That is what we'll be considering today.
  3. Sometimes, like Joseph, we **react to life's interruptions** instead of **responding to them as opportunities**. Our fear of what others may think will often dictate our actions and cause us to move too swiftly and irrationally. Yet when our decisions are marked by humility and having experienced the love of God, we are then able to pause and see the **extraordinary acts of God** unfold in our **ordinary acts of patient and responsive obedience**.
  4. If we are not thoughtful, aware, and humble, our response to significant interruptions can send us down the wrong path.
  5. I don't have to tell you that this year has been filled with some significant interruptions. Nationally, we've had...
    - a. An ongoing pandemic
    - b. We're in the midst of a serious economic recession
    - c. Millions of American families are suffering from food insecurity—many for the first time.
    - d. We have ongoing racial mindfulness
    - e. We have intense political polarization
- G. And individually, there's been a whole host of additional interruptions... some of us on the front lines as first responders, medical workers, or teachers who have to do double duty of having students in the classroom and online, grocery store workers, bus drivers... those working from home and trying to manage and keep kids both focused and motivated for online school. Others have endured job loss, or experiencing a friend or relative who has died alone in a hospital.
- H. All that to say the shelter at home mandates have led to some blessings for families as well as uncovering some significant dysfunctions—in our own lives, in the big C Church, and in our country. We must continue to ask God what He is wanting to teach us through these multifaceted interruptions??
- I. As we look back at 2020 it would be good for each of us to evaluate how we have dealt with this plethora of interruptions??
- J. Let's consider Joseph's and Mary's significant interruption and look specifically at Joseph's **initial reaction** and **eventual response**. (I'm a reactor on a lifelong journey to become a responder...)

1. Joseph and Mary were betrothed to be married. Like the Christmas Season, betrothal was supposed to be a magical time. But, as we know, it was during this time that an angel appeared to Mary and told her that she would miraculously, as a virgin, conceive and give birth to the Son of God.
  2. On the one-hand it is certainly joyful news! On the other hand, it was more than complicated and filled with lots of unknown implications.
    - a. How would she explain her pregnancy to Joseph? Would he believe her? Would he be willing to take on that responsibility? This was certainly not in their plans.
    - b. Legally, if word got out, she could be stoned to death for committing adultery—and it would be a given that many (most?) people would regard her as a harlot for the rest of her life. And yet, she accepted it and surrendered into it. Initially, Joseph didn't believe her. How could he? His plans for a normal and happy home with the woman he loved were dashed before his eyes. His life, as well as hers, had been powerfully and forever interrupted.
- K. If we are not careful, we can react to an interruption instead of responding to it. If we stay in reaction mode, it can send us down the wrong path.
- L. **Here's what we know**...the key to handling significant interruptions is to step-back and get God's perspective. Thankfully, God rescued Joseph from his calm and kind, yet reactive decision.
1. I can imagine Joseph's sleep was quite restless that night. Having learned of Mary's situation, he likely was tossing and turning in his bed, agonizing over his options.
  2. Finally, he makes the decision to divorce her privately. No doubt sleep did not come easily but when he did manage to finally fall sleep the angel of the Lord appears to him in a dream.
  3. I would say that the magnitude of that dream most likely awakened him.
    - a. We don't know his state of mind upon awakening, but we can assume he believed the dream was from God – and there must have been both belief along with some significant and continuous apprehension.
    - b. Yes, he did get to marry the woman he loved, yet what were both the short-term as well as the long-term implications of what the angel told him? Yet, nevertheless, he had acquired God's perspective of his interruption.
  4. When we encounter a significant interruption, it's important that we don't react according to our own feelings, thoughts, and limited perspective. It's essential that we seek God's perspective and direction. It's good to keep Proverbs 3:5-6 in mind: *"Trust in the LORD with all your heart, and do not rely on your own understanding; think about Him in all your ways, and He will guide you on the right paths"* (HCSB).

- M. You might think the same thing I did when I first read the text...if an angel showed-up to tell me what to do every time I had a big decision to make, that would be quite helpful, right??
- N. Yet, the unfolding gospel does make provision for us to discern and know God's will when significant interruptions disrupt our lives...

## II. BODY

- A. The gospel provision of the Incarnation is that both wisdom and discernment are ours for the asking.
1. Wisdom is a gift from God
    - a. *"But if any of you lacks wisdom, let him ask of God, who gives to all generously and without reproach, and it will be given to him."* --James 1:5
    - b. *"Who is wise and understanding among you? By his good conduct let him show his works in the **meekness of wisdom**."* --James 3:13
    - c. For James, wisdom is not merely intellectual it is also behavioral. Meekness was considered weakness by the Greeks, but **Jesus elevates it to a primary Christian virtue** (Matt. 5:5; 11:29) as we learned in our study of the SOTM. Meekness comes not from cowardice or passivity but rather from becoming a humble learner—trusting God and therefore being set free from the trappings of an anxious life.
  2. Discernment is also a gift from God
    - a. *"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and of spirit, of joints and of marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart."* --Heb 4:12 [Let the Bible read you.]
    - b. *"But solid food is for the mature, who because of practice<sup>1</sup> have their senses trained to discern good and evil."* --Heb 5:14
    - c. *"Give your servant therefore an understanding mind to govern your people, that I may discern between good and evil, for who is able to govern this your great people?"* --1Kings 3:9
    - d. *"And it is my prayer that your love may abound more and more, with knowledge and all discernment, so that you may approve what is excellent, and so be pure and blameless for the day of Christ."* --Phil 1:9–10
    - e. These verses provide us with some insight into how discernment increases in our lives.
      - 1) We dig-in to God's word (and let it read us)
      - 2) We practice (now what NOT to do is just as good as knowing what TO do)

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<sup>1</sup> Maturity equals the accumulation of spiritual habits.

- 3) We humble ourselves like Solomon did.
  - 4) We pray for it—as Paul prayed for the church at Philippi.
3. To articulate these thoughts into three quick practical applications, I have three thoughts... to help us to respond to interruptions instead of reacting to them...
- a. Humble Prayer: The first thing to do when your life is interrupted is stop and seek the Lord. Pray for wisdom and discernment, insight, understanding, and guidance. Pray for courage. If it's a conflict begin with what you can own.
  - b. Holy Perspective: Seek God's perspective for what the interruption can teach us and how it could grow us. "Lord, as much as I'm able to withstand, I want to see what You see and feel what You feel."
  - c. Place your Hope in God's Providence (or sovereignty): Instill in your heart and mind that God, in His sovereignty, is in ultimate control of all things. Nothing can happen to you without the leave and notice of your God and Father. He still has all of the hairs on our head numbered.
- B. When we **respond** to interruptions instead of **reacting** to them, they can positively redirect our lives. This was true of Joseph and Mary. Their plans were interrupted, but oh, what an interruption. Can you imagine a more **wonderful privilege**, or a more **challenging responsibility**, than to be the human parents of the Son of God? **The direction their future took was not what they had counted on—and it was not without drama and pain, but it was so much better than they ever could have dreamed.**
- C. Have you ever considered that God could do something similar in your life? Not that you would be made the parents of the Son of God, but that God would take **what seems to be an interruption**—or a host of interruptions—and use them to set your life (or our church) on a new and better path.
- D. Whatever set of interruptions you may be enduring right now, why not seek to see them in a different light, and ask, "God, are you using this to do something awesome in my life?" Then begin to look for the marvelous things He wants to do.
- E. Whatever interruptions you may be experiencing this Christmas Season, there is one thing we can all do: **stop and give thanks to God for sending Jesus**. And as you praise and thank God, even in the midst of difficult circumstances, something of the peace (or the restoration of *shalom*) that Jesus came to bring will be yours.

### III. CONCLUSION

- A. When Jesus comes, He changes everything.
- B. Scottish theologian Sinclair Ferguson: "Until this point, Christ had changed nothing in Joseph's life. [But] from now on Christ would change everything. I wonder if everything has been changed by Christ, for you?"
- C. If you're a believer, I would invite you to surrender afresh to God's love and care.

1. If you're not yet a believer, I would ask, "Why in the world would you not want to be?"
  2. Whatever your heart longs for cannot be achieved through willpower alone. Jesus came to live, to die, and to be resurrected so that you and I can participate in His power – doing in us and through us what we could not do on our own.
- D. As we shift into celebrating The Lord's Supper, I'd like to read to you a prayer written with these verses in mind by Susan Leatherwood, our Admin Coordinator...
- E. **Divine Interruption:** Dear Lord, in one brief moment, two young people suddenly had their lives turned upside down. Both deeply steeped in their Jewish faith, Mary and Joseph are both unexpectedly given a choice to accept or reject Your will, knowing full well the possible backlash and humiliation it could bring to them and their families if they accepted. But what we are told Lord, is they did not hesitate to say yes; yes to your will in their lives. What was that moment really like for them Lord, when Joseph and Mary spoke together the very first time after each was visited by your messenger? Were they excited? Did they sit together and hold hands, eagerly sharing all that they were told? Did they spend time dreaming about how their lives would be as parents to the Savior? Or were they frightened of the unknown future that lie ahead? After all Lord, they were just two ordinary people like me. Did they realize, at that shared moment, that what they were being asked would change the world forever; God preparing them to be the doorway for our Immanuel? And what of us Lord, for our Immanuel has come? Are there doorways You wish to use us for? As Mary was the doorway to usher in our Savior, are we too to be doorways to usher your love into the world? Are we, Your children who know You, guilty of keeping You neatly tucked away in our hearts behind closed doors? Forgive us Lord. We humbly acknowledge the time is well past due for us to toss open the doors of our hearts allowing your precious and unconditional love to once again flow freely through us!

Show us Lord, in this present time, as we celebrate Your entrance into our fallen world, that as you sent your messengers to Mary and Joseph, You send Your Holy Spirit to us. Help us Holy Spirit, in the quietness of our moments shared, to hear Your call as Mary and Joseph heard. Help us to quickly respond and say Yes without fear of what lie ahead. Teach us to seek You each day, and to listen for, and eagerly await, Your "divine interruptions" in our lives. Help us to be willing to listen for Your invitation and say "yes," knowing that in our response we will find peace. May Immanuel live in us, and not we live, but Christ our Savior live in us and show Himself in us and through us.

Help us Lord to freely proclaim "Immanuel" .... "God with us." Amen

#### IV. COMMUNION

- A. The burdens you're carrying right now probably weren't put on you by the Pharisees, as in Jesus' time, maybe it was you yourself who laid them on. Whomever and however they came to be there, as we come to the Table today, let us remember that this is a place to lay burdens down. Not just the burdens and cares of our daily lives -- surely those -- but also that great burden that comes from us being sinful human beings. As we remember Jesus, let us also remember that the new covenant in his blood was given for the forgiveness of sin. I will pray over the elements and then we'll partake together...

- B. Prayer: God who calls us as we are and forgives all we've done, we thank you for the assurance of your forgiveness today. We thank you for the symbols of bread and cup that remind us of Jesus and how much he gave to make your forgiveness known to us. As we take the bread and cup, let us commit ourselves to lifting burdens for others and sharing your freely-given love with all we meet. In the name of Jesus, our incarnated Christ, AMEN

### **Community Group and/or Personal Questions for Consideration**

1. What has been the most surprising discovery about yourself in 2020?
2. Like Mary and Joseph, God's call includes both suffering along with a deep and abiding joy. Talk/think about how suffering and joy work together for our good and God's glory.
3. Are you more of a reactor or a responder? What will it take for you to slow down to "practice" responding?
4. What do you think the Holy Spirit is saying to the American Church in this moment in history?
5. What do you think the Holy Spirit is saying to CCC in this moment of our history?
6. What do you think the Holy Spirit is saying to you and your household in this moment in history?

I.