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Advent IV

Interrupted by God
Luke 1:38

A few years ago the *Chicago Tribune* told the story of a bride whose wedding plans were interrupted. The wedding was planned for September 9. On July 28 the bride learned that her fiancé was having an affair with another woman. The evidence of his behavior was irrefutable. With the wedding less than six weeks away, the bride called it off.

The bride and her mother became very busy trying to undo all the arrangements. After canceling the band, the florist, and the photographer, they ran into a serious problem. They learned that they would still be responsible for a four-course dinner for 125 people. So the bride decided to “turn this into something positive.” She rearranged the guest list by removing all the men. She made it into a women’s only party to benefit two charities which assist women and children in poverty. Instead of bringing wedding gifts the guests were asked to make donations to the charities.

This was a bride who refused to be undone by her misfortune. She embraced this unwelcome interruption of her plans as an opportunity to help those less fortunate than her (Lillian Daniel, *Journal for Preachers*, Advent 2008, page 17).

The same dynamic is at work in the life of another young woman who is described in the first chapter of Luke’s gospel. Mary’s engagement plans are interrupted by the visit of an angel who brings Mary the news that she will give birth to a very special child. Medieval writers and artists were fascinated by the way this visit interrupted her life. Some imagined her reading Isaiah 7 when the angel arrives. This is the prophet’s foretelling of the birth of Christ. Others show her interrupted not from reading but from spinning. They imagined that Mary was spinning Jesus’ shroud as if she could have prepared for his death before she even knew of his birth. Luke doesn’t tell us what Mary was doing when the angel arrived. But whether she was reading or spinning or planning her wedding the visit of the angel interrupted the course of her life.

As a teenager from a poor family Mary would not have been looking forward to a four-course dinner for 125 people. The only security she had came with being engaged to Joseph. Without Joseph she would be completely vulnerable in a society where women had no rights. The news brought to Mary by the angel threatens the only security she has. This fact gives urgency to Mary’s question to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin (Luke 1:34)?” As an unwed pregnant teenager her future suddenly looks grim. The security provided by her engagement is in jeopardy. She has to decide how to tell Joseph. If she tells Joseph that she is pregnant by the Holy Spirit she will appear insane. Her only other option is to offer a more logical explanation that will mark her as unfaithful.

Luke tells us that Mary decides to embrace this interruption of her life. She says, “let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38).” She tells her husband the truth believing that God will help him understand. When Mary sings the song we call the Magnificat she celebrates the interruption that has come to her life. She trusts her future to God.

Mary's example poses an important question for each of us. Are we willing to let God interrupt our lives? Can we learn to set aside our own cherished plans long enough to let God use us as instruments of his purposes? Lauren Winner has described her struggle with this issue in these words:

[Interruptions]... lead to uncomfortable glimmers of self awareness; they show me to be a prideful control freak who dares to think that whatever I've got on tap for the day is supremely important and who dares to think that I own my own precious time...interruptions...when I let them, foster... humility. And it is that hard to swallow fruit of humility that allows me to sometimes recognize these interruptions as God's way of gradually schooling me in the grand imperatives of letting go of all I cling to and following Christ (*Christian Century*, December 16, 2008, page 20).

John Calvin's ministry happened because he found a way to let go of his ambition. He wanted to live the quiet life of a scholar and writer of books. The success of his *Institutes of the Christian Religion* had put him well on the way toward accomplishing that goal. He was on a journey to Strasbourg in 1536 where he planned to pursue his ambition. As one of the largest Protestant cities in Europe this was an ideal place for him to implement his plan. He made an overnight stop in Geneva, Switzerland. There he was interrupted by a desperate and persistent reformer named William Farel. Geneva had just adopted the Reformation and needed someone with Calvin's intellectual depth to bring about lasting church reform. Calvin said no to this offer. Farel argued that God would not bless Calvin's work as a scholar if he refused to help those who were in desperate need of his services.

Calvin later wrote that after listening to Farel, it seemed to him that "God had from heaven laid his mighty hand upon me to arrest me (T.H.L. Parker, *John Calvin: a Biography*, page 52)." Calvin believed that his life had been interrupted by God. He set his plans aside and stayed in Geneva. He soon discovered that he had a lot to learn about being a pastor and a church leader. As he worked through his early failures he came to realize that he was no longer in control of what was happening. He must trust the future to God.

This is the issue that confronted King David in the seventh chapter of 2nd Samuel. David had arrived at a point in his kingship where he had succeeded in securing his kingdom against its enemies. He was ready to turn his attention to the spiritual needs of his people. He wanted to construct a magnificent temple as the centerpiece of his legacy. This would be his gift of a lifetime to honor the God who had led him through so many difficult times. The plans were drawn up. The funding was in place. He was ready to move on this huge project.

But David's project is interrupted. The prophet Nathan shows up at the last minute to inform David that God does not want his gift. God does not care about this kind of house. God wants the kind of house that no human being can build. God wants an eternal house to provide salvation to all people. God has chosen David to be an instrument in advancing this divine project. God will use the line of David to provide a messiah whose kingdom shall never end. David has to set his plans aside so that God's plan may unfold. In this matter David is not in control. Like Mary he comes empty-handed to embrace God's purpose for his life.

God's interruptions make clear that we are not in control either. Like Mary and David we stand before God with empty hands, as we learn to set our plans aside, and trust our future to God.