

Life, Disrupted
Luke 1:26 – 38
Sunday, December 13, 2020 (Advent 3)

Over the past two weeks since Thanksgiving, whenever I have talked with anyone from the church, I have asked them, “How was your Thanksgiving?” And usually they respond along the lines of, “Well, it was okay. It was different this year. Not what we had hoped for. No big family gathering. The kids or grandkids couldn’t come,” or, “We couldn’t go over there. It was just me,” or, “It was just the two of us.” And as I heard story after story like this, it made me think back to a Thanksgiving 14 years ago. Jen and I were living in Nebraska, a thousand miles away from our families, and we had just lost our daughter Madelyn three months earlier. So it was a hard time for the two of us to be spending Thanksgiving apart from our families.

But we were determined to make the most of it, and we had a plan. The year before we had fixed this boneless turkey breast that was rolled up with stuffing inside of it. It was *really good*, so we said, “Let’s do *that* again.” We went out and bought the same stuff we had bought the year before. On Thanksgiving morning, I got up and went to prepare the turkey. I cut open the packaging and the little netting that holds the turkey breast in shape, and as I cut it open, the whole thing just fell to pieces in my hands. Instead of buying a whole turkey breast, I had accidentally bought turkey *pieces*. Who knew that was a *thing*, but apparently it is – already cut up pieces of white and dark turkey meat. I stood there in the kitchen with these turkey pieces falling out of my hands into the sink, thinking, “It’s ruined. Our whole plan for this meal is ruined. What are we going to do?”

And I absolutely lost it. After the loss of a child, I was already dealing with so much frustration and pain and disappointment that when *this* went wrong it was like everything came pouring out. Nothing else in life was going as planned, and I just wanted that *one meal* to work out. Just *one*

thing to go right and to be good. So when it *didn't* work out the way I had *planned*, I was *crushed*. I got overwhelmed and stressed out and *angry*. It was only a turkey, but for me it embodied everything that was going wrong in my life at the time.

Jen and I went to the store to try to find the right kind of turkey, but it was Thanksgiving Day in a small town, so of course they didn't have anything. Jen said, "Let's go home and try to make that turkey work. We'll figure something out." But I was grumbling and upset, thinking, "What's the point? The whole thing is ruined anyway. Why even bother?" We went home and threw something together and cooked it. When we sat down to eat that afternoon, we tasted the turkey, and to our surprise it was *better* than what we were planning on making. We were sitting there saying to each other, "I can't believe this worked out! This is *really good!*"

Now, here's the thing. Every year since then, we have tried to make that same meal again. We have gone to store after store from Nebraska to Pennsylvania, looking for turkey pieces, and we can't find them *anywhere*. It's like they don't exist anymore. This meal that we didn't plan on making – that *disrupted* our plans – now we try to plan to make it, and *those* plans get disrupted.

Life doesn't always go according to plans. Sometimes our plans are disrupted. Some of those disruptions are bigger than a turkey. A pandemic. Surgery. The loss of a job. The loss of a friend or loved one. A divorce. Cancer, depression, a sickness or injury that changes the way you have to live your life. Some of them are small, but they *seem* a lot bigger than they are. The little things that pop up every day that throw off our plans or schedules. There are little things that disrupt our days and big things that disrupt our lives. But big or small, disruptions come. It seems like we make all these plans for our lives, all the things we *want* to happen, and the picture-perfect way we *want* everything to work out. We try to organize our lives and our time

to *avoid* disruptions, or at least to *minimize* them. But our plans don't always work out the way we *expect* them to. They get disrupted by *life*.

Mary had made plans for her life. She was engaged to marry Joseph. They were going to settle down and start a family in Nazareth, a small town kind of off the beaten path. It wasn't going to be anything glamorous. Just a simple life, a modest living. But it was going to be *theirs*. Until one day something happened that disrupted all of that. An angel of the Lord appears to her and says, "Mary, God is with you, and even though you aren't married yet, you are going to have a baby." Talk about a disruption. Talk about taking all your plans and just flipping them upside down. This is *not* the way things were supposed to work out for Mary. This is *not* the way she imagined her life would turn out. This is *not* what she had *planned*.

And this wasn't just a *little* disruption. This was a life-changing, *life-threatening* disruption. This would *not* have been good news for her. If her fiancée Joseph finds out about this, he knows that's not *his* baby, so he's going to think she was unfaithful to him, and he would be perfectly within his right according to Jewish law to break off the wedding or *have her killed*, because adultery was punishable by death.

Even if he *doesn't* have her killed, her life is basically over anyway because no man will ever want to *marry* her after that because they will think that she already *been* with another man and has been unfaithful to Joseph. So why would *they* trust her? She won't have anyone to *provide* for her (because in that time it was *very* rare for a woman to be able to support herself), so she will have to stay in her parents' house until *they* die, at which point she will likely be out on the street, begging for a living until *she* dies. So Mary is facing the prospect of physical or social *death*. With this annunciation, her life has been thrown into total chaos.

When the angel first shows up, it says that Mary is “perplexed” by his words. But the word for *perplexed* there is the Greek word *diatarachthe*, which literally means, “agitated or greatly troubled,” which is the nice way to say that Mary was *freaking out*. The first thing she says is, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” After 2,000 years, we tend to over-spiritualize her words, but put yourself in the place of a teenage girl who just found out that she is inexplicably pregnant. It reads more like, “What?! HOW? How can this be?! I am a virgin! That’s impossible! This isn’t part of the plan!”

But then the angel lets her in on the *new* plan – that the Holy Spirit will come upon her, and the power of God will overshadow her, and this child will be holy, the Son of God. What at first looks like a massive disruption, turned into something *good* and *life-giving*, something better than she ever could have imagined.

And so how does Mary *respond* to this disruption? How do *we* respond to the disruptions in our lives? The tendency is to complain or get upset or just say, “Why me?! Why is this happening to *me*? Why can’t things go according to plans?” But that’s not what Mary does. She says, simply, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word.” She responds in *love*. And love is *patient*. Love is *kind*. Love does not insist on its own way; it doesn’t say, “This is the plan! This is the way things have to be!” Love bears all things. Love believes all things. Love hopes all things. Love endures all things. And that is how Mary responds. With patience and hope and trust in what God is able to do.

And she is *able* to respond that way because of what the angel says to her. The angel appears and says, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, for you have found

favor with God.” Twice there, the angel uses the word *favor*. That word *favor* is the Greek word *charis*. It gets translated more commonly as *grace*. It’s the word that gets used all throughout the New Testament when they’re talking about *the unconditional love of God*. Love that does not have to be *earned* or *deserved* but is *freely given*. The angel is coming to Mary and saying, “Greetings, graced one, beloved one. Don’t be afraid, Mary, because God is *with you* and God *loves you*.” And it is the knowledge of that love, Mary’s ability to *receive* that love that allows her to say, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.”

Mary does not ultimately respond in *fear*. She responds in *trust* and *humility*, *giving herself* to this disruption and the new possibilities that it holds, because she trusts in God’s presence with her and God’s love for her. Through this disruption, she is able to give herself to God and be a part of what God is doing in the world.

What if instead of looking at the disruptions in our lives as negative things, as problems or setbacks to be avoided, what if we could see them as *opportunities* to be a part of what God is doing in the world; to let God be at work *in* us and *through* us? Instead of complaining or getting upset or asking, “Why me,” what if we say to God, “Okay, plans have changed. How are you going to use me in this situation?” Use the disruption to ask God what new person God wants you to meet, what lesson God wants you to learn, and what greater purpose God can use you for now that you have experienced this disruption. Maybe *your* plans are being disrupted so you can gain a better sense of *God’s* plan.

Life is not about *avoiding* disruptions. Life is a *series* of disruptions. Our lives are filled with disruptions every single day, things that pop up that we never expected or planned. The challenge is how we *handle* those disruptions. And our calling as servants of God is to let God

use us in the midst of the disruptions. If we really trust that God is in control of the world and our lives, then when interruptions come we can say, “This is just an opportunity for me to learn something new and serve God in a new way.”

This season of Advent is a time when we *expect* the disruption of God in the world and in our lives. God disrupted *the world* in the birth of Jesus so that we could experience God’s love and presence and salvation in a new way. Advent is a time when we expect God to do that again. We expect God to disrupt our lives so that we can see God’s intentions for the world and experience God in new ways. We expect that things won’t always go according to plans, but that God is at work to bring about something *even better*.

Life is full of disruptions. Expect them. And expect God to use them as opportunities for God to show you in a new way that God is *with you*. When those disruptions come, try to respond, not in anger or fear, but in love; in a way that shows patience and hope and trust; in a way that says, “Let it be with me according to your word.” In fact, respond *exactly* that way. When a disruption comes, say to yourself, say to *God*, “Let it be with me according to your word.” And let God use that disruption to *bless you*, in the name of Jesus.