

“Pardon the Interruption”

Luke 2:41-52

Westminster Presbyterian Church, Greenville, SC

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Now every year Jesus’ parents went to Jerusalem for the festival of the Passover. And when he was twelve years old, they went up as usual for the festival. When the festival was ended and they started to return, the boy Jesus stayed behind in Jerusalem, but his parents did not know it. Assuming that he was in the group of travelers, they went a day’s journey. Then they started to look for him among their relatives and friends. When they did not find him, they returned to Jerusalem to search for him. After three days they found him in the temple, sitting among the teachers, listening to them and asking them questions. And all who heard him were amazed at his understanding and his answers. When his parents saw him they were astonished; and his mother said to him, “Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.” He said to them, “Why were you searching for me? Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” But they did not understand what he said to them. Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth, and was obedient to them. His mother treasured all these things in her heart.

And Jesus increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God!

Wow! You all responded right on queue! Thank you! I will admit I was a bit nervous that by the third go, you might have had enough. It would have been pretty awkward if you had just sat there, waiting for me to respond to myself. Then again, I guess I’m not too surprised you went along with it. After all, these words are a part of our *liturgy*, the work we as a people do to worship God.

Week after week, we say these words back to one another.

The Word of the Lord.

Thanks be to God.

Are y’all awake now? Like many of you, I’ve practiced that pattern so many times that I could almost say it in my sleep. Maybe that’s why I was so struck by an instance not so long ago when the pattern was interrupted.

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It was around this same time of year, and I was an intern at a state-run hospital in Trenton, New Jersey. As a part of my learning experience, I was to help plan and lead a Christmas Eve service not so different from the one we shared just a couple of days ago. There would be carols and candlelight and, of course, the reading of that familiar story, which I assigned to a man who was a patient at the hospital.

When the time came, the man approached the microphone and began, “In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered...” On, he continued, breezing through all the tricky names, his voice rising and falling with confidence, as he told the story of Jesus’ birth. Finally, he came to the end. “...and Mary wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn.” He paused. He looked up. And, seeing the expectant faces of those worshipping, he declared, “Well, yeah! That’s pretty much it!”

“That’s pretty much it?” I had to catch myself. Time after time of the same familiar pattern, and this new conclusion threw me for a loop. My ear had been trained to expect a certain ending and respond accordingly, but this...now, this was different; this was unexpected; this was an interruption.

“That’s pretty much it!” I had to admit, though, the man had a point. After all the weeks of Advent waiting, the longing and preparation, God finally arrives in the person of Jesus Christ, and what on earth more could there possibly be? The prophets told of a coming messiah. The angel visited Joseph and Mary. They traveled all the way to Bethlehem. And, at last, a child was born! The arc of God’s story peaks at this momentous birth.

Christmas comes every year much like before, filling our homes with greenery, our schedules with last-minute to-dos, and our church sanctuary with the sounds of “Silent Night.” But, is that pretty much it? On this day after Christmas, when we start debating how much longer we can reasonably leave up the tree, we may also find ourselves wondering, “What more? What now?”

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Today’s text affirms that the birth we’ve just celebrated is not quite “pretty much it.” The story goes on in both scripture and our lives. As anyone knows, babies grow up in the blink of an eye, and by the time we return to Luke’s gospel, Jesus is a gangly twelve-year-old. He’s spent his childhood in the town of Nazareth and emerges in Jerusalem, where he and his parents have traveled for the springtime festival of the Passover.

Like the holiday rituals many of us just observed, this trip had become tradition in Mary and Joseph’s household. And, as with those same rituals, I imagine Jesus’ family had some specific ideas about how the celebration should go. Like couples who spend their first few years of marriage fleshing out the essential holiday dishes and the color of lights on the tree, Mary and Joseph had more than a decade to develop rituals together. They may have stayed in Nazareth for other festivals, but for the Passover, they traveled to Jerusalem “every year...as usual.” Luke repeats this point multiple times, establishing that the custom is as indisputable as the presence of dressing—not stuffing, *dressing*—on my family’s Thanksgiving table.

For Mary, Joseph, and Jesus, this was a familiar journey marked by time-honored traditions in a well-known place. Every year as usual, they loaded the caravan and journeyed south alongside other Jews from Galilee. Every year as usual, they stayed in Jerusalem for a week of worship and festivities in and around the temple. Every year as usual, they turned around and went home to resume their lives.

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But, this was not every year as usual. This year, Jesus was on the brink of adulthood by Jewish standards, and he was dipping a toe in the waters of independence. Mary and Joseph had been traveling a full day before they realized he was missing from the mass of people returning to Galilee. Can you imagine?

I can remember the one time I went missing as a child. I was young enough to still have a nap time and sneaky enough to leave a note on my pillow and slip out the door. I made it all the way across the street to the home of our neighbors, hoping to procure one of their famous

homemade donuts. Yes, I did say donuts. Instead of offering me a donut, however, my neighbors met me at the door, flustered, and ushered me to the safety of their living room before promptly calling my parents. It was hardly the adventure I had hoped for but nowhere near the disturbance Jesus caused by staying behind.

Far from the confines of neighborly, donut-sharing suburbia, Mary and Joseph must have been terrified. Here, they'd made this trip at least a dozen times without a hitch, and suddenly their boy had slipped out from under their noses. Once they realized Jesus wasn't among the travelers, they would have had to separate from the crowd and retrace their steps, not knowing where—or in what state—they might find him.

When they finally discovered him sitting among the teachers in the temple, Mary and Joseph were “astonished,” not because of Jesus' great understanding but because of his sheer nerve. Where Mary is often depicted as unphased, willing to respond to whatever wild call God may place upon her life, in this moment, she is utterly human, utterly mother, and utterly ticked off. “Child,” she addressed Jesus like the boy he still barely was, “why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.”

Now, I know it's not unusual for children to accuse their parents of overreaction. You all know the scene: a grown-up makes some mildly embarrassing remark, and suddenly younger eyes are rolling along to the drawn-out tune of “MOOOOMMMM.” However, if there ever were a time for such complaints, this moment in the temple was hardly it. Jesus had worried his parents sick. He had derailed their travel plans and sent them on a wild goose chase, all so he could have a little more time among the teachers. Jesus had caused a massive interruption.

But, that's not how Jesus saw it. Not at all. In fact, he wasn't exasperated by his mother's concern; he was simply confused. Here, at the height of the moment, Jesus asks his flustered parents a question so obvious it's almost absurd, “Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?”

These words, it just so happens, are the first Jesus utters in all of Luke's Gospel. Of course, much has already been said *about* Jesus: that he would be named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace...that he would give knowledge of salvation to his people and forgiveness of their sins...that he would give light to those who sit in darkness and guide our feet into the way of peace...Yes, much has been said about Jesus, but now, Jesus speaks for himself, “Why were you searching for me? Didn't you know I must be in my Father's house?”

With these words, Jesus is setting the tone for his approaching ministry. He is coming of age with an indication of his loyalty, which is not to the way things have always been, inconvenient and even unsettling though that may be. His loyalty isn't to the same trip in the same way year after year. His loyalty isn't to the teachers in the temple. His loyalty isn't even to his own father and mother. Though it may come as an interruption after all that's been said and expected of him, Jesus' loyalty is to God alone.

What can we glean from Jesus' matter-of-fact first words? On this day after Christmas, how might God be born to us again through what he has to say? I'd like to propose two possibilities.

First, that we allow ourselves to be interrupted by Jesus, no matter how inconvenient or unsettling that may seem. As Ben observed on Christmas Eve, this is a time of year when we are especially inclined to crave the familiar, yet we are in the midst of so much that is foreign or new. You may be navigating a new job or relationship or identity. And then, of course, there are new variants, a new political landscape, and an imminent new year. How might we, rather than

resisting such new developments, receive reality as it is and work within it? How might we remain open to the possibility that God will work through and despite us to bring about more than we could ever hope or imagine? How might we, like Mary, experience Christ's interruptions and have the humility to treasure them in our hearts, as Luke tells us she eventually did?

Secondly, I'd like to propose that we, like Jesus, recommit our loyalties to God alone, even when that means becoming agents of interruption in the world. Jesus' response to God's call transcended his obedience to any earthly power, even his family. Whether he intended to or not, the boy Jesus caused quite the commotion through the expression of his commitments, and we all know that was just the beginning. So, how might we join him in interrupting the way things are for the sake of the way things could be? How might we punctuate the perfunctory for the purpose of justice, mercy, and peace?

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Craig Barnes is now the President of Princeton Seminary but served for many years before that as a pastor of congregations.¹ Early in his ministry, he was wrapping up a busy week and had already skipped his day off for an inbox that was a mile deep. Anxious for some relief, he turned to the one item remaining on his to-do list: a visit to the local nursing home, where he was scheduled to serve communion. He raced there in his car to "take care of the commitment," as he puts it, praying (to his later shame) "that God would help him get through the thing so he could just get back to work." After a brief worship service for ambulatory residents, he traveled down the hall to those who could not leave their rooms.

Craig writes, "It was then that I met my priest for that day, Mrs. Lucille Lins." Mrs. Lins was blind and hard of hearing. It had been years since she had been able to attend church in person, and many who remembered her had since died or moved away. Craig tried to be cheery, but it was a humbling scene. Mrs. Lin mumbled some words he could hardly understand and spilled grape juice on Craig's crisply ironed pants, as he served her. Uneasy and ready to move on, he wrapped things up with a quick pat on the back and some vague remarks about how much God loved her.

Craig was walking out the door, when Mrs. Lin surprised him by beginning to pray in a clear voice, "Thank you, God, for being so good to me. Thank you that I am not forgotten. Thank you for always loving me."

Just like that, an interruption. "At last," Craig writes, "something had broken through my manic efforts at being the savior. Stunned, I dropped back into my chair. A long time of silence passed. I did not want to leave her because this was my first sacred moment all week, and I knew this woman had so much to teach me. This blind woman could see what I could not...I had not prayed a single prayer of gratitude all week. I had been way too busy asking God to help me achieve more."

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That's how Christ comes, as an interruption. Christ comes as an interruption at Christmas, the Divine drawing near in infant form. Christ comes as an interruption in the temple, teaching even his own parents about his higher call. And, Christ continues to interrupt our here and now that we might experience the transforming power of God's love come down. The Great Interruption continues throughout creation, through prophets and poets and ordinary people called to usher that interruption into the world. As the late pastor, theologian, and civil rights leader Howard Thurman puts it, this is "The Work of Christmas,"²

¹ Craig Barnes, *When God Interrupts* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996).

² Howard Thurman, "The Work Christmas" in *The Mood of Christmas* (Richmond, IN: Friends United Press, 1985).

“When the song of the angels is stilled,
when the star in the sky is gone,
when the kings and princes are home,
when the shepherds are back with their flocks,
the work of Christmas begins:
to find the lost,
to heal the broken,
to feed the hungry,
to release the prisoner,
to rebuild the nations,
to bring peace among the people,
to make music in the heart.”

May it be so. Amen.