

The Rev. Craig T. Kocher
Associate Dean of the Chapel and Director of Religious Life
Duke University
Luke 1:26-38
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Pardon the Interruption

The first year we were married, my wife Abby and I were drafted to play Mary and Joseph in a live nativity. I played Joseph. The event came together late and a couple of evenings kneeling in the cold damp grass underneath a clumsy lean-to was not how we imagined spending several precious hours in the busy week leading up to Christmas. But when lay-people get their minds around something, the clergy tend to fall in line, so there we were surrounded by a few lively, though thankfully tethered, sheep and goats, and several middle aged men dressed up in bathrobes who didn't appear all that excited about being shepherds. Never has a blonde haired blue eyed Joseph in a yarmulke looked so ridiculous, not that it mattered of course, for all the attention was on Mary. It seemed everybody, from the young and starry-eyed, to the old and stoic, wanted to stay close to Mary and the baby she cradled.

I doubt Mary was so popular way back when. You may have heard me say before that Mary is not all that popular with most of us Protestants now, probably because deep down we have a sneaking suspicion that Mary is, well, Catholic. Mary likely wasn't in such demand on the day, or was it a night, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her and shared the good and somewhat startling news that she was going to have a child. The Jewish theologian Elie Wiesel says that if an angel ever appears to you saying, "Do not be afraid," you better watch out! A major job is on the way. Mary had a life. She was young, probably in her early teens. She had jobs to do, people to care for, a marriage coming up, wedding details to hammer out. And all of it is interrupted; everything she had known, hoped for, dreamed of, imagined that her life would be, is now thrown up in the air. "Dear Mary, Pardon the Interruption, but I have good news for you. You are favored by the Lord. So favored in fact, that even though you're still a virgin, you're about to be pregnant, making you an immediate outcast, destroying any good standing social reputation you have, possibly sabotaging your upcoming marriage, and in all likelihood leaving you a poor, destitute, unwed teenage mother, responsible for raising the savior of the world. Congratulations."

And yet, Mary, courageous young Mary, says yes. "Let it be done to me according to your word." Because of her courage and faith, Mary has been held up throughout church history as a model of Christian life. She is someone who hears God's word and says yes. And with that yes, Mary's life is suddenly interrupted. Thus is the shock and awe of Christmas, the incarnation of God born in the flesh of a little child, as fully dependent as every other newborn child. For much of history human bodies, especially women's bodies, and the bodies of the poor, have not been cherished, but have been seen as a means to an end, something to be used for the pleasure or economic gain of others. But God sees Mary's body as a temple, a place to be filled with the Holy

Spirit, holy like the burning bush, or Moses on the summit of Mt. Sinai, or the inner sanctuary of the Jerusalem temple.

A mother is all sustenance, all life to a newborn child, and everything about God was knit together in Mary's womb. Mary not only gave God his body, she was God's companionship, God's safety, God's warmth, God's food, God's hope. In Mary's womb God whom Mary and all of Israel depended on became dependent on her, not as one in heaven or far removed from human life, but in human flesh, God enters a peasant girl's womb. On the occasions when I talk to expectant parents today, they will often rattle off a list of what they've done to prepare, pre-natal vitamins (check), birthing classes (check), nursery painted (check), the latest parenting books from Barnes and Noble (check), research on every possible health concern done on google and wikipedia (check). All good. All important. All non-existent for Mary. She has only herself and Gabriel's word.

There's a scene in one of Jan Karon's *At Home in Mitford* novels. It's Christmas Eve and Father Tim is in the sanctuary setting up for the Christmas Eve candlelight service. He notices a man in the corner of the sanctuary, weeping. Father Tim draws a little closer, wanting to comfort but not wanting to disturb. The man begins to rage and cry at God: "Are you up there? Are you up there? If you are up there, why don't you say something, why won't you listen to me!" Gently, Father Tim says to the distraught man, "Maybe you are asking the wrong questions. Maybe the question is not whether God is up there, but whether God is down here." At Christmas, God comes down here, born in the busyness of human life and the warmth of human flesh, all because Mary allowed herself to be interrupted.

We all know that life is full of interruptions. Life may well be what happens between the interruptions, or maybe life is the interruptions. Often those interruptions bring good news, a spur of the moment evening with a friend you haven't seen in a long time, a Christmas card from a relative almost forgotten, a colleague bringing a hoped for result with a knock at the door, an out of the blue phone call offering the opportunity of your dreams. But interruptions can also come with heartache, a doctor diagnosing a major health issue, the sudden loss of a loved one, a market downturn that changes retirement plans, an email from a child's teacher saying things are not going well, management cutting back and a job disappearing.

For most of us, we can construct our lives in such a way to fend many interruptions off. We have calendars to keep us busy, and the tyranny of email to keep us focused, and make us feel productive. Most of us have enough money so that we don't have to rely on the generosity of others, and we have the kind of social networks in place so that if something unexpected does happen, people are there to catch us if we fall. For many of us an interruption is merely a brief diversion from our daily routine, something to be dealt with so we can go back to whatever it was we were in the middle of. I sometimes wonder if our busy schedules and resources and social networks don't become a defense mechanism to keep God at bay, to keep God from meddling in our well ordered affairs. Who needs God when you've got a credit card? Many people in our world,

people a lot like Mary, don't have resources and social networks to protect them. I wonder if Mary was wiser than us in a way, that she knew life is not be micro-managed, that interruptions are bound to happen, and the things that will change us most profoundly are completely out of our control, and that when something unexpected comes our way, be it good news or bad, it might be an opportunity to draw closer to God, or to allow God to draw closer to us.

December can be an especially painful month for interruptions. In December life is full. There is work to get done before the New Year and social engagements to attend. Christmas cards need mailing and presents wait to be bought and wrapped. It is a festive and cheerful month, or at least it is supposed to be. Yet for many the December cheer is constantly being interrupted, interrupted by the memory of a loved one who is no longer here, interrupted by the sad news of a cholera outbreak in Zimbabwe, or a bombing in some unknown corner of Baghdad or Afghanistan, interrupted by another round of lay-offs at a well-known company. Today is December 21 meaning tonight will be the longest night of the year. In December when the days grow short and the nights grow long, many discover longer nights of restless worry about some previously unforeseen interruption or another.

Norman Bendroth is a United Church of Christ pastor. He was twelve on Christmas Eve 1965, the night he walked into his father's hospital room. His father had taken a bad fall while hanging siding on a friend's house a month and a half earlier. As a consequence of the fall, Bendroth's father was a paraplegic at 42, a brutal interruption in his life and the lives of all those who loved him. Bendroth remembers his childhood frustrations that Christmas Eve and how desperately he wanted someone to name the interruption, to stand up in the midst of all the wrapping paper, turn off the Christmas music and say,

“Folks, this is a wonderful season and a blessed time to be together, but this year it is bittersweet because Harold is not with us. It is hard to be happy; it is hard to celebrate when someone we love has just had his legs taken out from underneath him. To pretend that this tragedy didn't happen would be wrong. But we are here to celebrate nonetheless, and we dare to light a candle of hope. We are here because God's yes is greater than tragedy's no.”¹

If you are at all like Norman Bendroth, if it may be hard to get in the holiday spirit this year because there is a hole in your heart. If you want to interrupt the shopping list and Christmas music and parties because something is hurting in your life, or the life of a loved one, or because the evening news is almost too much to bear, then listen to Mary, stay close to Mary. Stay close to Mary because Mary's yes to God, and God's yes to Mary is God's yes to you, and to me, and to the whole creation, and is greater than tragedy's no.

¹ Norman Bendroth, *The Cruellest Month*, The Christian Century, December 30, 2008, Vol. 125, No. 26., pg. 10.

The interruption in Mary's life was God coming close, coming down here, born in a particular life, and into a world of joy and sadness, a world in economic tatters, full of violence and war, and a world of hopes and dreams and longing. For Mary, the interruption in her life became for her the place to grow close to God, to be with God, to literally share in God's life, not in her strength, but in her weakness and confusion, in the mystery of what would happen to her, and in the frailty of a new born child.

One of the first things Mary does after she says yes is sing. We call it the Magnificat, or Mary's song. In her song, Mary praises God for another kind of interruption. Loudly and clearly, Mary proclaims that God's bringing about new life in her is linked to God's offering himself in Christ, and bringing about new life in us. Mary, full of grace, full of the word incarnate, sings of what God will do through the child in her womb. He will lift up the humble and knock the powerful from their thrones. He will fill the hungry with good things and send the rich away empty. He will show mercy to those who fear him, and stay true to the promises he has made. He will establish justice and his kingdom shall have no end. Mary's song is about God's holy interruption, interrupting not only our lives, but the whole of the cosmos. Mary's song is a Christmas song, with a loud chorus of angels and shepherds and wise men, and every person who has stood around the piano singing Christmas carols with loved ones, or had a lump in the throat singing silent night on Christmas Eve joining in.²

Christmas is the story of God's interruption, of pushing past our busy schedules and coming close, about God interrupting a world gone astray, and bringing it back to himself.

Remembering his tears that dark Christmas Eve in 1965, Bendroth says that God's interruption begins with a cry. Do you hear it? Do you hear it this Christmas season? Out of a stable, out of the dusty hills of Bethlehem, comes a cry. It is the cry of every parent who has buried a child; the cry of the worker whose hands lie idle; the cry of the widow whose arms are empty; the cry of a body in the throes of AIDS or cancer or heart disease; the cry of every one who has suffered some horrible interruption.

It is not only humanity's cry, it is also God's cry, the cry of God interrupting the world as we know it in Jesus Christ and saying, "Enough! Enough of blind eyes and hard hearts, enough of greed instead of justice, enough of slander instead of truth, enough of loneliness and fear. The day is coming says the Lord, when I will restore the years that you have lost, when I will bind up the brokenhearted, when I will fill this world with song, and the hungry with good things. In the darkness of a long night, God will again interrupt the world's flow with a holy cry, a cry that says yes, yes to Mary, yes to you, yes to me, yes to the longings of every human heart.

And the word become flesh and dwelt among us, full of grace and truth. ³
Amen.

² I am grateful to my colleague at Duke Divinity School, Lauren Winner, who helped point out the implications of Mary's song.

³ I am grateful to Norman Bendroth whose work helped shape the content and ending of this sermon.