

When God Interrupts: Joseph Matt. 1:18-25 12/20/20

A couple years ago, Robert Meilhammer was hunting geese on Maryland's Eastern Shore with three friends when he noticed a flock of Canadian geese flying overhead. A member of his hunting party fired, striking one of the geese. Unfortunately, the trajectory of the of the falling goose brought it directly down into the blind in which they were sitting, striking Meilhammer in the head! He is fine now, but this incident struck me as a pretty good metaphor for 2020! All of our lives have been interrupted in ways we could not possibly have imagined just a year ago, ways that would have seemed as farfetched as a goose becoming a heat-seeking missile homing in on a poor unsuspecting hunter! But here we are. So, what do we do about these unprecedented interruptions?

We are continuing a series of sermons entitled, "When God Interrupts," and this morning we come to the story of Joseph. It takes place in the small, backwater town of Nazareth, where Joseph is an ordinary guy who is a builder of some sort. Only Matthew's gospel tells his story, but it's a good one!

¹⁸Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. ¹⁹Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace,

planned to dismiss her quietly. ²⁰But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, “Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins.” ²²All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: ²³“Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel,” which means, “God is with us.” ²⁴When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, ²⁵but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus. (Matt. 1:18-25)

Our English translation says that Joseph was engaged to Mary, but in reality it was a little different than engagement today. They were actually betrothed, which meant that they were legally bound to marry one another, probably a union arranged by their families. Betrothal was so binding that it could only be broken by divorce. So Joseph's life must have been shattered by the news that Mary was pregnant. He knew that the child wasn't his, so he would have felt a personal sense of betrayal because of Mary's obvious infidelity to him. And, local people would have assumed that the child was his, which would have brought all kinds of shame on him and his family. His reputation would never recover from this.

The law dictated what should be done in such a situation. Joseph would go to the village elders and publicly proclaim Mary's pregnancy, filing for a divorce, and bringing great shame to Mary. Though it was apparently not practiced in Jesus' time, the Old Testament law actually called for the death penalty for Mary in such a case, which gives you an idea about how serious a matter this was. It's hard to imagine a greater interruption to the quiet village life that Joseph had imagined for himself- both personally and socially.

But, interruptions can reveal something about the condition of our hearts, and in this case we learn something important about Joseph's heart. He was able to see past his sense of betrayal, his anger, and his hurt- all of which were entirely justified. He was able to see past those things because he was a "righteous man" in the words of Matthew. A man who had compassion for others. So he planned to divorce Mary privately, in order to cause her less pain and shame. Not many men would be so concerned about the feelings of a woman who had betrayed him! This interruption showed what kind of a man Joseph was. I wonder what our present interruptions are showing you about what's in your heart. We'll come back to that.

OK. Then the angel shows up. You'll notice that there are angels all over these stories- Gabriel appears to Zechariah, and then to Mary. And

lots of angels show up at the birth of Jesus, too. It seems that when God is doing something extraordinary, he sends his angels to be sure the main players understand what's going on! In this case, the angel came to Joseph. ²⁰*But just when (Joseph) had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. ²¹She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins."* (Matt. 1:20-21)

Wow! The angel invites Joseph to look past his fears and his hurt, past the social conventions of the day, and complete the betrothal by getting married, because the child was from the Holy Spirit. And, he tells Joseph something about this child to be born- "*he will save his people from their sins.*" I can picture poor Joseph saying, "Wait! What?" It was an awful lot for Joseph to take in! But Joseph's reaction to this revelation reveals something else about his character: He trusted God.

Trust today is in short supply. In 2018, the Edelman annual "Trust Barometer" showed the largest-ever recorded drop in trust in the survey's history! Can you imagine what it would show today in 2020? The survey showed a staggering loss of trust in American government, business, and media. Clearly, people have lost trust in our most basic institutions, institutions that we rely on for accurate information, good products, and

basic services. We are facing a crisis of trust. For example, who do you trust for information about the coronavirus? Dr. Fauci, Dr. Levine, Governor Wolf, President Trump, the CDC, Fox News, CNN, OAN, Facebook or Twitter posts? Who are you trusting in this life and death situation?

Last year, the services supervisor at the Boulder Pointe Golf Club was told that an errant driver had been located. As he proceeded to the location, he expected to find a golf club lying on the course. Instead, he found an Amazon delivery truck driver stuck under a tunnel that was designed for golf carts. A different kind of errant driver! The driver had been relying on his GPS to guide him to a delivery location and it took him under the tunnel, where he was wedged! A tow truck was called to pull him out, and his packages were transferred to a different truck. But, this driver put his trust in the wrong thing! It's important that the things in which we trust are trustworthy!

Joseph clearly put his trust in the right thing, in the goodness of God. He believed the words of the angel, and believed that through this interruption God was working good, so he cooperated and obeyed the words of the angel. ²⁴*When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife,* ²⁵*but had no marital*

relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

(Matt. 1:24-25)

He trusted what the angel said about the conception of the baby, which took a great deal of faith, didn't it? So, he was wed to Mary, trusting her and the God who had revealed this incredible story to him. And when the child was born, he obeyed the angel and named him Jesus, which is a play on a Greek word which means, "He will save." He raised this boy as his own, which must have had its own unique challenges! He even had to leave his homeland and become an immigrant in the foreign land of Egypt for the first years of Jesus' life in order to protect him from Herod! Talk about interruptions! Joseph continued to trust God, a trust already present before the interruptions he faced. This is who Joseph was.

So, as you deal with both the routine interruptions of life, as well as the extraordinary interruptions of this year (including a pandemic and a rancorous election and its aftermath), what are you learning about your character? Are you tempted to pull inward, focusing on a smaller and smaller circle, neglecting those in need outside your circle? Are your actions demonstrating a genuine concern for others- wearing masks, social distancing, and limiting gatherings? Are you able to trust that God will watch over us and will bring good even out of the losses, pain, and disorientation of this time, or are you edging toward despair or anger?

This time of interruption is an opportunity to take a serious inventory of the condition of your soul, not so you can beat yourself up over your failings, but in order to make the changes that God wants to make in you, for your good and for the good of others. I encourage you to use this opportunity to examine yourself so you can continue to grow into the kind of person God created you to be.