

Luke 2:1-20

About that time Caesar Augustus ordered a census to be taken throughout the Empire. This was the first census when Quirinius was governor of Syria. Everyone had to travel to his own ancestral hometown to be accounted for. So Joseph went from the Galilean town of Nazareth up to Bethlehem in Judah, David's town, for the census. As a descendant of David, he had to go there. He went with Mary, his fiancée, who was pregnant. While they were there, the time came for her to give birth. She gave birth to a son, her firstborn. She wrapped him in a blanket and laid him in a manger, because there was no room in the hostel. There were shepherders camping in the neighborhood. They had set night watches over their sheep. Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, "Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger." At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him. As the angel choir withdrew into heaven, the shepherders talked it over. "Let's get over to Bethlehem as fast as we can and see for ourselves what God has revealed to us." They left, running, and found Mary and Joseph, and the baby lying in the manger. Seeing was believing. They told everyone they met what the angels had said about this child. All who heard the shepherders were impressed.

Mary kept all these things to herself, holding them dear, deep within herself. The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told! (The Message Bible)

Interruptions – who needs 'em? We only use the word when we are focused on doing something where we don't want to be disturbed and lose our train of thought. We don't like it when we are making steady progress toward finishing a project

or speaking our mind. There are times, however, when we are plodding through something we'd really like to take a break from, when we would WELCOME an interruption of any kind.

The Christmas story recounts several significant interruptions. Mary is a good person to start with, and the first interruption took place more than nine months before the birth.

Luke 2:26-32 God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High.

Talk about an interruption! This kind of intervention came from God, and Mary's life would never be the same again. So much for the normal, quiet life in Nazareth, living behind the carpenter shop. Mary was engaged, but not married, and there are always neighbors who are finger counters, shaking their heads and going tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk-tsk, when Mary's pregnancy began to show. The conception MUST have happened before the marriage ceremony, and the neighborhood is clearly going to the dogs! Mary must have had an extraordinary faith to believe that God would make her a mother without a natural father. Joseph, too, received God's revelation that Mary was not to be shamed, but instead -- honored. He too, had faith that God could do what had never happened before – that a child could be born sinless. Nevertheless, Joseph no doubt was the subject of rumors and snickers about the poor guy whose wife had been playing house, and he had not been invited.

When the time of the birth was rapidly approaching, there was another interruption. She could not be positive about the due date, but it was obvious to her and everyone else that it could be VERY soon.

This time it was the lousy government, facing its own kind of fiscal cliff, demanding that a fool-proof census be done in order to maximize taxes. Back to your ancestral home town! No excuses. No exemptions for handicapped or pregnant women. All had to go. For Mary and Joseph, it was the worst interruption. Risk having the baby away from friends and family. Only strangers. Nasty weather. No insurance. No oversize baby bag. The timing could not have been worse. A first-time mother and father pray that everything would progress normally – at home -- surrounded by familiar faces and places.

While the timing seemed brutally wrong, God's Word makes it clear that it happened at exactly the right time:

Galatians 4:4 But when the time had fully come, God sent His Son, born of a woman, born under the law, to redeem those under law, that we might receive full rights of sons.

It was an unexpected interruption in the lives of Mary and Joseph. It was a divine interruption. It resulted in the birth of the sinless son of God. It had to be that way for the sacrifice of His life to settle payment for your sins and mine.

Luke moves us quickly from the birth to the account of another interruption. There are shepherds, doing what shepherders do – watching their flocks. Keeping them together. Watching for coyotes, ferrel dogs, and even wolves. It's honest work but not brain surgery. It required a keen eye and a love for animals. Sheep were in constant demand – lambs for sacrifice, fully grown adults for wool and meat. The hours were long, but if you were lucky, you could share time with a friend. It was a rare thing for shepherds to ever have a visitor. On that first Christmas night, there was a spectacular interruption. This one was personal, and it included a message that was both as old as the hills and as new as the moon rising.

“Suddenly, God's angel stood among them and God's glory blazed around them. They were terrified. The angel said, “Don't be afraid. I'm here to announce a great and joyful event that is meant for everybody, worldwide: A Savior has just been born in David's town, a Savior who is Messiah and

Master. This is what you're to look for: a baby wrapped in a blanket and lying in a manger.” At once the angel was joined by a huge angelic choir singing God's praises:

Glory to God in the heavenly heights, Peace to all men and women on earth who please him.”

Now this kind of interruption they would have welcomed any and every night. The Savior's birth had been promised and foretold for hundreds of years. Faithful Jews believed God's promise and expected him to deliver on it in spades. People expected the news to be relayed by royal messenger to the palace. The messengers were from the king alright, but they were angels, giving the details, and joining in praise, not to the government, not to the merchants, not to the hospitality industry, but to God the Father in the heavenly heights. In the gift of the baby, there could now be peace between God and humankind.

Being conscientious and efficient, they quickly followed the directions and worshipped the newborn Savior and King. There was no rehearsal. It was simple, honest worship. They worshipped God in human flesh as best as they knew how. The only presents they brought was themselves. After knowing the Savior had come for them, they had to respond with worship.

We don't know how long the worship took. Luke writes imply: “The shepherders returned and let loose, glorifying and praising God for everything they had heard and seen. It turned out exactly the way they'd been told!”

They went back to work, back to the sheep, back to the pasture, back to the stream or water hole, back to pulling sheep out of bushes and crevices. They did not leave their work and enroll in the school of the prophets; they did not become priests or clerics. Their lives had been interrupted in a way they could not have imagined. It was a divine interruption, but not the last one.

Interruptions – God has not interrupted our lives as he did to Mary and Joseph. God has not interrupted our lives by sending a choir of angels to sing a concert of the Gloria in Excelsis for our ears only.

But God has interrupted in our lives, or if he hasn't, then he is ready to.

God could have let the people of this planet die in their sins and their unbelief, separate from him. God could have left us searching for meaning and purpose and happiness, but finding only dead ends and failures. God determined to intervene, to interrupt the normal lives of people living in darkness, and he gave the world -- and he gave US Jesus, the Light of the World. The fancy word is "incarnate" -- in the flesh. The Son of God, the very Word of God, in the flesh.

John 1:14 The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Jesus was a unique interruption in the lives of Mary and Joseph. He changed their lives forever. Jesus was a spectacular interruption in the lives of the shepherds and all those who heard about Jesus from the shepherds. The news about Jesus, seeing Jesus, changed their lives forever. The greatest gift ever given, the baby in the manger, is born to US. A baby always changes our lives, and the baby whose birth we celebrate tonight is ours. Remember the prophet Isaiah's words?

Isaiah 9:6 "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given..." This isn't just THEIR baby. This is YOUR baby. This is God's intervention into your life. This is a divine interruption equal to any other.

As Martin Luther reflected on the Christmas Gospel, he wrote this:

"There are many of you in this congregation who think to yourselves: "If only I had been there! How quick I would have been to help the Baby! I would have washed his linen. How happy I would have been to go with the shepherds to see the Lord lying in the manger!" Yes, you would! You say that because you know how great Christ is, but if you had been there at that time you would have done no better than the people of Bethlehem. Childish and silly thoughts are these! Why don't you do it now? You have Christ in your neighbor. You ought to serve him, for what you do to your neighbor in need you do to the Lord Christ himself."

As we do that, we make it possible for God to carry out a divine interruption in the lives of the people we know and meet, in the lives of the people in this community, in these islands, and as far as God's power enables us.

Perhaps the news of a baby, born to you, is not new, and a birthday party like this is similar to ones you've been at dozens of times. It doesn't get old!

Today we celebrate God coming to earth as a baby. He is God's unique gift to you. He is fully God, and fully baby. But he is born so that he can die. From the first breath he takes, he is on the path to the cross, to redeem you from your sins. He comes to earth for the purpose of dying, and he fulfilled that purpose for you, and for all. There is no peace on earth without that sacrifice. There is no heaven in my future or yours without faith in the one who comes as your Savior.

So we pray:

O dearest Jesus, holy child, Prepare a bed, soft, undefiled,  
A holy shrine, within my heart, That you and I need never part.

May you experience the special peace and joy that comes with knowing that it is the birth of your personal Savior that we celebrate today, and into eternity.

Philip Tesch  
December 25, 2016  
North Highlands, California