

December 18, 2005
Isaiah 7:10-17, Luke 1:26-28
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"Divine Disruptions"

Bunny and I met in seminary when she was in her first year and I was in my second year of school. At that time, students went on an intern year for their third year of study. I was planning to go to the Seminary of the French Reformed Church in Paris, France. One day in Richmond, we were driving in the car and talking about our plans for the following year. I assumed that she would stay at Union for her second year, while I would be in France for my third year. "Well," she announced, "I guess we'll have to get married sometime this spring before we go to France." I almost wrecked the car! No matter what plans we make for the future, things happen and everything changes.

Long ago in a small town in Galilee, a young girl, promised in marriage to a man named Joseph, suddenly finds her life turned upside down. Can you picture Mary sitting in her parents' house? Her morning chores are done; the fire is set in the hearth; the water is drawn and the bread dough is left to rise. As she sits at the loom to weave, Mary daydreams about her future with Joseph. She imagines being the mistress of her own home. Suddenly, Mary sees something she has never seen before. The room is filled with bright light, moving air and an overpowering presence. A messenger disrupts her peaceful thoughts and simple plans. When the angel Gabriel speaks to her, she is troubled and filled with fear. The angel speaks, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." From that moment on, her life is never the same.

Every day, you and I experience countless disruptions. The moment you wake up, you remember the breakfast meeting you almost forgot. You can just make it on time if you hurry. In the kitchen, your daughter tells you that she needs to take some cookies to school. As you scrape the name "Oreo" off the cookies, you wonder whether you will fool anybody into thinking they are homemade. Right when you are ready to walk out of the door, the dog runs off. Surrounded by children ready for school and loaded down with laundry for the cleaners, you somehow manage to get the dog back into the house. Miracle of miracles - you make it on time to school, to the cleaners and more or less on time to the breakfast meeting. At the office, you are catching up on e-mails when the boss drops a new project in your lap. So it goes throughout the day. That night when the work is done, the carpools are over, supper is finished, the homework is complete and the kids are asleep, you fall exhausted into bed. Just as you drift off to sleep, the phone rings.

"Hello!" A strangely familiar voice says, "Hi! Did I interrupt you?"

"Well, I was just going to bed."

"You sound tired."

"Yeah, it was a hard day."

"Seems like all your days are like that. There's something I've been wanting to talk with you about."

"Now?"

"Yes, now. You seem so busy all the time that I can hardly get your attention anymore."

"I've got a lot on my mind. It's hard enough keeping up with the kids and their stuff. Then there's the yard, not to mention the office. I don't even get to read the paper, take a walk or talk to my friends. When I do have a minute all I want to do is zone out in front of the TV. Then, if I don't fall asleep on the sofa, it's off to bed. I'm not even looking forward to Christmas."

"Sounds like you feel trapped. Same old stuff all the time. You're missing something. Something important. That's why I've been trying to get your attention."

"You have? When?"

"Last week I painted your name in the clouds, but you had on sunglasses and didn't see a thing. On Sunday, your little girl was talking to you and I thought I was coming through loud and clear; but you had the TV on and didn't pay attention to anything she said or I said. Last night, when you said your prayers and told me everything you needed and fell asleep before you got around to listening to me. This morning, the dog ran away just to remind you that you're not always in control."

"By the way, who is this? You never told me your name."

We're not the first to have a hard time listening to God. In the book of Isaiah, King Ahaz has trouble hearing God speak. He is so caught up in his own schemes that he can't take God very seriously. As the King of Judah, he faces a double threat from Syria and Israel. The nations are threatening King Ahaz to go along with their revolt against the mighty Assyrian Empire. Isaiah calls on King Ahaz to listen to God and to trust in God. Ahaz doesn't have time for a troublesome prophet and a distant God. He is planning to enlist the aid of Assyria in keeping his neighbors from toppling his throne. In the midst of the crisis, Isaiah tells Ahaz to ask God for a sign. Ahaz mutters something pious about not putting God to the test. In fact, Ahaz does not trust God to come through for him. Statecraft has taught him that an army at the gate demands more power than God can give. He is too scared to trust what cannot be seen. In spite of Ahaz's refusal to ask, God still gives Ahaz a sign. God gives Ahaz the sign of a child to be born, Emmanuel, which means God with us. Even in the devastating days ahead, God will be with you Ahaz. Open your heart and believe!

That's the way it is. It is hard to listen when we have the weight of the world on our shoulders. It is hard to hear God speak when we are doing all the talking. It is hard to be open to God's disruptions when we have dressed ourselves in protective armor and clever

defenses. We stay in the middle of the crowd because those who dare to stand out from the crowd, at best, get laughed at and, at worst, get crucified. Therefore, we lead safe, dreary and unsatisfying lives. All the while, God has something to say to us.

When Gabriel spoke to Mary, a quiet, ordinary afternoon changed into an eternal moment; and a simple house became a holy sanctuary. God's disruptions scare us to death before they fill us with peace. When we are open to these divine disruptions, God becomes more than just a word in our vocabulary. Faith becomes more than just a positive attitude.

Jesus becomes more than a heroic figure. Our lives become more than a mass of cells moving through space and time. We are given a purpose and a destiny. God turns our lives inside out and upside down before we can say with Mary, "Let it be unto me according to your word."