

## Mary and Joseph Interrupted

In the video clip, we see a pretty common scenario is probably for any couple that has been together for a while. One person is trying to tell the other something very important, while the other is deeply involved in a project. In this case, Mary is trying to break the news to her fiancé Joseph that she is pregnant, while interestingly enough Joseph is hard at work on the house that they will move into once they are married. This is the interruption to end all interruptions; that the plans they had so meticulously crafted for their future would have to be set on hold because God had something different in mind.

The idea of “interruption” is actually a pretty important plot point in many of the most popular Christmas movies. In “Christmas Vacation,” all Clark wants is to have a nice family Christmas with both he and his wife’s extended families staying over at their house. But interruption after interruption challenge his plans and his attitude, not the least Cousin Eddie showing up out of nowhere, or his Christmas bonus turning out to be a membership in a jelly-of-the-month club rather than actual money. In “Elf,” Buddy interrupts his biological father’s life and causes him and his family to re-evaluate what Christmas really is about. And of course, in the greatest Christmas movie of all time, Die Hard, Hans Gruber and his group of thieves interrupt John McClane’s Christmas visit to his wife’s company Christmas party at Nakatomi Plaza. In all of these movies, the main characters are forced to make a choice on how to respond to the interruption.

I don’t know how it is for you all, but for me, holidays can be some of the most joyful and stressful times of the year. I love this time of year because I get to see family members that I don’t often see. But at the same time, being married, Erin and I have to juggle how to spend time with both families, who to spend time with and how to make it all “fair.” Some years we do better than others. Because we both have large extended families with large get-togethers and we both have quite a few church related events during this time of year, there is very little margin-of-error if we hope to actually see everyone. So, when an interruption comes along, when something gets changed or something goes wrong, it can easily send me into a bit of a tailspin, because in order for Christmas to be “perfect,” the schedule has to work out just right.

We are a people of plans, whether it is related to something as specific as the holidays, or something as broad and nebulous as our futures, or something as small as what we will be having for lunch. Plans are important. So, what happens when Jesus interrupts your well-made plans?

### 1) The Interruption

In our Scripture for today, we see Joseph and Mary, in the throes of their plans for marriage; receive some pretty confusing, challenging and overwhelming news. Mary, a virgin pledged to be married, was chosen specially by God to give birth to the Savior of the world, His Son, Jesus Christ.

Now, in order to understand the gravity of this interruption, we need to understand a little bit more about Jewish marital practices. Biblical marriages were by and large arranged. According to one rabbi, they believed that marriage was too important to be left up to the whims of the heart. Take that for

what you will. Money and goods would have been exchanged between the families to ensure that they were committed to one another. And then the bride and groom would've been considered married. However, they would have to wait for at least a year to consummate the marriage, during which time the husband would work on building a home for him and his wife attached to the home of his parents. Once this home was built, he would go to retrieve his wife, there would be a large celebration with friends and family, and the marriage would be consummated. It was a very long and involved process that included plenty of planning for the bride, groom, and their families. Because they were considered married even before any sort of ceremony, the only thing that could break off this relationship was an official divorce; there was no such thing as a "Runaway Bride" in Biblical times. And though there are different schools on what constituted the rights to a divorce in the OT, adultery was definitely a deal breaker.

Things were going so well for Mary and Joseph, and then God broke into the picture and interrupted their well-made plans. Have you ever had your plans interrupted by God?

We can certainly see many examples of God's interruptions throughout Scripture. Noah was living his life with his wife and children when God informed him that he was the only righteous person in the whole earth, and because of this he would have to build an ark for he and his family and two of every kind of animal so that God could wipe out the world with a flood but spare them. Abraham and his wife Sarah, in their old age, had finally given birth to their own child, Isaac, when God interrupted and commanded Abraham to sacrifice him in a test of faith. Paul was just fine, a Jew of Jews, Pharisee of Pharisees, travelling around a persecuting Christians, when all of the sudden Jesus appeared to him on the road, blinded him, and totally changed his career direction.

St. Francis also experienced an extreme interruption from God. Born the son of a wealthy cloth merchant, he was given opportunities to basically do whatever held his fancy at the time. He and his friends were well known in the area for going around town, eating, drinking, and singing very loudly. Once, he wanted to participate as a knight in The Crusades, but after he was fitted with very nice armor and given a horse, a combination of illness and fear sent him home. After a visit to Rome in which he spent some time with the poor, Francis was on the road home when he encountered a leper. Deadly afraid of their uncleanness, he felt a prompting from God and got off of his horse, kissed the leper, gave him money, and continued on his way. When he turned around, the leper was gone, prompting Francis to think he encountered Jesus. After this event, he gave up all of his worldly possessions and dedicated his life to preaching and serving the poor.

Without a doubt, Jesus will come along and interrupt our plans. It may not be as dramatic as some of these examples; in fact, I believe there are moments in our daily, weekly, monthly, and yearly lives where God breaks in and challenges us. The question then is, how do we reply?

**Transition: In order to see how we should/could respond to God's interruption, let's return to our story and see how Mary and Joseph responded.**

## **2) The Response**

### **A) Mary's Response:**

In the Luke passage, the gospel writer records 3 responses from Mary to God's interruption. In Luke 1:28, the Angel Gabriel appears to Mary and says, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." In vs. 29, it says that Mary was "greatly troubled" and "wondered what kind of greeting this might be." For those of you with children who are a bit older, you may have experienced this type of reaction too, when your child comes into the room complimenting you, or giving you a gift, knowing that they probably did something and are trying to butter you up before the other shoe drops.

Gabriel then tells Mary that she is going to give birth to the Messiah, the one who would save not only the Jews but the entire world. She responds, in vs. 34, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?" This is a pretty understandable reaction. After all, she had been faithful to Joseph during this time, and virgin births were pretty much unprecedented in the world she knew. Her response to Gabriel is reminiscent of Zechariah's response to Gabriel's news that we heard last week. Zechariah wondered how he and his wife Elizabeth, in their old age, could possibly have a child. In fact, Gabriel reminds Mary of her cousin's pregnancy, as an example of the miraculous power of God.

Now, this is where Mary and Zechariah's similarities take divergent paths. Zechariah demanded a sign from the angel that these things would come to pass, and because of that was made mute until the baby was born. Mary, instead, simply accepted the angel's words, saying in vs. 38 "I am the Lord's servant, May your word to me be fulfilled." Her response to the angel's announcement is amazing, considering that she was just a simple, young, rural girl while Zechariah was part of the priestly line. But even when facing this serious interruption to her plans, Mary faithfully responds that she would be a part of whatever God had in mind.

### **B) Joseph's Response:**

Joseph's plans too were interrupted by God's plans. But interestingly enough, his plans are interrupted twice. First, as he was preparing his home for Mary to move into, she comes to him and shares that she has somehow inexplicably become pregnant, even though they were supposed to be celibate. The most plausible explanation was adultery, and Joseph had every right to publically shame Mary in divorce court, which could even lead to her being killed through stoning. He could have been indignant about what "she had done" to him and used this opportunity for revenge. Instead, as an honorable man of action, he decides to divorce her quietly. His plans were interrupted, and so he formed new plans.

But now, his new plans are again interrupted then when an angel appears to him in a dream. The angel's message to him was that this baby was no result of adultery, but rather he was the child of God brought on by the Holy Spirit. Furthermore, the angel wants Joseph to name the baby Jesus, which would be a public symbol that Joseph was accepting this child as his own. It was not only socially significant that Joseph name and therefore adopt Jesus, but it was deeply significant to the Biblical declaration of who the Messiah would be. **Isaiah 9:6-7**, an incredibly important passage because the prophet Isaiah gives his listeners hints about the nature of the coming Messiah, tells us that He would be a descendant of King David.

*For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.<sup>7</sup> Of the greatness of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and forever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this. Joseph twice had to respond to pretty serious interruptions to his plan and both times he acts with honor.*

Unlike Mary, the gospel writer gives Joseph no lines of dialogue. Instead, it simply says in vv. 24-25. "When Joseph woke up, he did what the angel of the Lord had commanded him and took Mary home as his wife...And he gave him the name Jesus." His plans interrupted twice, Joseph responds in an honorable and faithful manner to both Mary and God, adopting Jesus as his own son, which would fulfill the Scriptures about the Messiah being in the line of David.

Both Mary and Joseph were faced with an impossibly difficult interruption into their ordinary plans of engagement and marriage, and both had opportunities to ignore God, to take the easy and maybe less embarrassing way out. Or both had opportunities to get angry or to throw pity parties for themselves. But instead, they placed their faith in God and followed after his commands, trusting that ultimately his plans for their future would be better than anything they could plan.

How do you respond when Jesus interrupts your well-made plans?

Jesus interrupted me last Saturday, and I wasn't ready for it. My family and I were walking around downtown Columbus when we were stopped by a homeless man. I wasn't in the mood for being hassled for money, we had already had so many people ask us for money, so after a few words I turned away from him and walked towards the next shop. Most homeless people are used to this and just continue on their way, but this guy wasn't having it. He followed after me, cussing me out, angry that I was ignoring him. At this point I was angry too for being harassed by this guy so I gave him a couple of bucks and moved on. I seethed about this for a while. You see I've worked with quite a few homeless people. And the reality is that there are plenty of organizations in the city that will feed them, if they are willing to go to those places. Beyond that, Columbus has a homeless run newspaper that they encourage the men and women to sell so that they aren't just begging for money. This guy wasn't selling a newspaper, he just wanted my cash, and I just wanted to be left alone, feeling indignant that he just didn't want to go to the places that would give him what he needed and instead wanted my money for drugs or alcohol. And in some respect, my logic about how he could help himself is not wrong. But the reality is that I was being interrupted by this man, and instead of giving him a few brief minutes of my time, I decided not to treat him even like a human being and just turn away. Jesus says in Matthew 25:40: <sup>40</sup> "Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me." I was interrupted by Jesus, and I ignored him. How can we, in the midst of our plans and our busyness, learn to be ready when Jesus interrupts us?

### **3) Conclusion:**

So, what can we learn from the way that Mary and Joseph responded to God's interruptions in their lives?

- 1) Like Mary and Joseph, we need to be ready to listen when God speaks to us. Now, to be fair, it's probably difficult not to listen when being confronted by an Angel. Nonetheless, we need to be prepared to listen for and hear God when he is speaking to us.
- 2) Like Mary and Joseph, it is alright to ask questions in order to understand what is being asked of us. However, unlike Zechariah, we shouldn't doubt God's ability and faithfulness to us.
- 3) Like Joseph, we need to respond with honor, rather than indignation at having our plans interrupted.
- 4) Like Mary, we too are the heirs of a history of Biblical people being asked to be a part of seemingly impossible events. And we can look to those who have come before us as examples of what it means to follow faithfully after God's interruption.
- 5) Like Joseph and Mary, we need to be prepared to accept that God's plans have meaning for our lives and for His purposes in the world, and that even though we may have thought our plans were well-made, His plans are much better than anything we could have come up with.

Ultimately Jesus' birth was God's interruption into a world headed towards destruction. In the beginning, God created the world perfect, and He placed Adam and Eve in this perfect creation to steward over it. But through choice, Adam and Eve sinned, therefore driving a wedge between humanity and God that could not be crossed by our own efforts. God set up a temporary system of sacrifices for people to be able to have their sins forgiven and be made right with God. But this system wasn't God's final say in the matter. He wanted the whole world, not just Israel, to have an opportunity to be made right with Him, and He really wasn't interested in the sacrifices of His people so much as He was that they sacrifice their whole selves over to Him. So, God interrupted the downward path of the world toward hell by sending His son Jesus in the world to be that final and permanent bridge between our sinful natures and God. And his birth interrupts our individual lives by calling us away from our sinfulness and selfishness and towards a life dedicated to God, made perfect through the life, death and resurrection of His son Jesus. Are you prepared to respond to Jesus when He interrupts your plans?