



An Interrupted Life

Bishop Ough's 2016 Christmas Message

The Christmas story is, at its core, a story of interrupted and disrupted lives.

The Christmas narrative has become so familiar to us that we can't imagine what an unexpected intrusion the angels and the baby and those gawking shepherds were for Mary and Joseph.

Imagine how Mary's life was interrupted when the angel Gabriel appeared and told her she would bear God's son.

Imagine how Joseph's boat was rocked when he learned of Mary's pregnancy. An angel urged Joseph not to fear. Right! How could Joseph not fear when his whole world had been disrupted by a pregnancy so unexpected, maybe even unwanted? When is the last time an angel intruded on one of your dreams without it being a significant distraction?

Imagine the disruption of traveling by foot and donkey to sign the tax rolls when nine months pregnant!

Imagine the anxiety and dis-orientation of finding no place to deliver the baby.

Imagine the chaos and interruption of fleeing to Egypt to escape the paranoia and hatred of King Herod.

And, seriously, can you *imagine* the constant disruption of raising the Son of God? Any child is an intrusion into an ordered, adult life – but Jesus?!

Mary and Joseph – the entire Christmas story – teach us one of the most difficult, yet profound, truths about God.

God fully intends to disrupt our lives. God is constantly seeking to interrupt our lives; commanding our attention; disorienting us; calling us to make room for God in our hearts and our lives.

The Christ-child is called Emmanuel, which means "God with us." Jesus is God's greatest intrusion into the world – into our lives. When God is with us, we are surprised, interrupted, awakened, disoriented. When God is with us, our imaginations are stretched, our love is magnified.

Are you ready? Are you ready this Christmas for the disruptions caused by angels and babies?

Like Mary, I have been pondering what it means to embrace God's disruptions in my life. My pondering has caused me to pray even more intensely and intentionally for the Holy Spirit to break through in my life and in my ministry.

And, my pondering has led me to imagine what it would look like if every United Methodist congregation and every United Methodist disciple of Jesus in the Dakotas and Minnesota became a powerful, courageous instrument of God's disruptive presence in our communities.

I can see hundreds, even thousands, of new people taking notice and seeking to make room for Jesus in their lives. I can see justice rolling down like a mighty stream. I can see fear and despair being replaced with hope and joy. I can see love and mercy prevailing over bigotry and violence. I can see transformed lives, families, political processes, and businesses.

I can see hundreds, even thousands, echoing Mary's response to God's intrusion into her life: "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

May it be so. And, may you each have a most blessed, merry, and interrupted Christmas.

Bishop Bruce R. Ough
Resident Bishop, Dakotas-Minnesota Area of The United Methodist Church