

Anthem: The Call Interrupts
Isaiah 9:6-7
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This Christmas we saw four instances of God sending Angels to visit people and give them some news. Let's look back at those people the Angels appeared to.

First, there was Zechariah.

God wanted someone to let the people know His Son was coming. He chose John the Baptist. Sometimes, God's plans are not so straightforward. He often takes a roundabout way to get his message out. God sees the big picture. God's big picture plan is to give Mary's cousin Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah a son named John. He will become John the Baptist...the voice in the wilderness calling people to repentance and heralding the coming of the Son of God.

We often think of the angel visiting Mary as the beginning of the Christmas story, but an angel visited Zechariah six months before that. Yet no one puts out a Zechariah figurine at Christmas!

Zechariah and Elizabeth had been trying to have children for years. Now, they were old and beyond hope of ever having them. Zechariah is called to offer incense and pray in the temple. He is living out what God created him to do. Serving the God he loved even though that God had not provided him with children. He was faithful in his service and faithful in his prayers.

There...in the temple, Zechariah was in his quiet place. He was in prayer. When he is called to a much longer quiet time.

The Olympics were all over the TV this summer. It doesn't matter what sport was your favorite, swimming, running, fencing; there is a moment in each event where you hear the buzzer that says, get ready and then comes a second buzzer that means go. I wonder how long that time span seems to those about to jump into the water or start running. How much goes through your head in those few seconds?

Zechariah and Elizabeth are asked to live in that moment. A nine-month long pause from the "get ready" to the "go." What thoughts ran through their heads? Then, that fateful day comes when John the Baptist is born. God was preparing their lives, preparing their hearts for something wonderful.

I find it interesting that Zechariah's "call" is about preparation and yet the first thing God does is make him silent. Perhaps silence, in this case, is the preparation. If you have a problem with your computer or phone, the first thing the IT team will say is "Shut it down, unplug it or restart it. Let it rest for a few minutes then boot it up again." It's amazing how often this fixes a problem. The same holds true for us.

Yet Christmas time is the hardest time to be still. It is the hardest time to find silence. Maybe...just maybe in the midst of the hustle and bustle of the Christmas celebration we need to take a moment and be silent, prepare ourselves, and be ready for the miracle.

* Let's take a few moments today to just be silent. Let's follow the advice of the Psalmist and just "Be still and know that He is God." (Psalm 46:10)

And then there was Mary... There really is no way Mary had any idea what she was in for. Women were not taught in the temples, but Mary was a smart girl. She must have had brothers. Mary listened. Did she know the prophecy? Did mothers in that time tell their daughters "Be a

good girl and maybe God will choose you?" If Mary knew...did Mary know this was the Messiah and that he would be the "lamb" to be "sacrificed?" What an amazing woman she was!

If you are an organ donor, and you get into an accident, and someone needs a heart...it is someone's job to make sure the heart gets put into a cooler and taken to the hospital. Massive amounts of things have to happen right away. Someone has to make sure the heart gets there. What a job that would be? The Bible says we all need a spiritual heart transplant. Jesus was the one who would provide a way to take care of our broken hearts. Mary's job was to take care of Jesus from inception, through childhood and adolescence until he was a grown man. What a job!

When called, Mary does not hesitate. Even though she has no idea how this is all going to happen, she simply says, "I am the Lord's servant". In other words.... "Here am I Lord...send me!" (Isaiah 6:8)

Notice the message was not "Do this and I will bless you." It was "You have been blessed. Do this." What if we could look at every opportunity to serve God, to make a sacrifice for God as confirmation that we have been blessed? Mary was called to provide. She was to provide for God in the flesh when He had made himself a helpless baby. She provided a place for Him to grow. She provided transportation when He could not walk. She provided education when he could not talk. She provided loving arms that only a mother can provide.

And then there was Joseph. For Joseph, the call was an interruption. He had his life planned out. He was a carpenter. Measure twice cut once. Joseph was a planner and he knew the plan. Get married. Have children. Live a life that is honorable. He had found a Godly woman to be his wife and the plan was going just as...well, just as he planned!

Have you ever noticed that the call that comes in at 6:00 am is louder than the one in the middle of the afternoon? It's a hard ring, isn't it? Someone had bad news and needed to tell you but decided not to wake you up, so they waited until first thing. You hear the ring and your first thought is "Oh no." Joseph's life gets interrupted, and his response is "Oh no." There's a great axiom: "Life is what happens when you are busy making other plans."

Joseph received a call to live a different life than the one he had planned. This would not be the life of a quiet carpenter. This would be a life of protecting a woman who is highly favored by God and protecting the son of God. That is a tall order. This is a calling to run from a crazy king, accept gifts from strangers, try to explain why your son is different from the other boys. This was not a part of his plan....but it was a part of God's plan all along. You see, when God calls us to change our plans, He is actually just asking us to join Him in His plan. The call interrupts. He's called to protect. The call changes everything.

And finally, we have the shepherds. This "Call of Christmas" that the shepherds experience was not bringing God to us. Calling meant connecting with the God who was already here. Waking up the presence that already existed.

Maybe a better term instead of "the calling" would be "the pushing" or "the pulling." God is with us moving us forward. God is in front of us bringing us to him. Can you imagine the shepherds that night? Life and the opportunity to respond to God's callings in it is a roller coaster ride...the joy, the fear, the excitement.

Praise is expressing our respect and gratitude to someone or something. That is the natural response to being called to anything. Those shepherds heard heaven praise God on the fateful night.

While they were called to "go and tell" keep in mind, this was not a call to change their vocation. More than likely the shepherds went back to shepherding after they saw the baby and shared it with others. The calling was a gift. "Go see the baby." But the gift was not a one-time thing. It was a life changing event. Did it make shepherding easier? Probably not but they would never see anything the same way again.

CONCLUSION

We know these stories. We've heard them again and again. Every year Linus with his blanket comes on TV and tells us the story. "Unto you is born this day..." The scripture says, "THIS day." The angel that came to the shepherds said: "It's now." This is no longer about preparation. This is happening now. GO.

We would do well to contemplate how God is calling each of us this Christmas: Maybe He is calling you to get prepared. Maybe you need to learn to be silent. You spend so much time talking, texting, posting, proclaiming. Maybe as we experience this last week of the year, you are being called to be quiet.

Maybe He is calling you to provide. Jesus...the grown man, not the baby...would say, "Whatever you do for the least of these, you do for me." (Matthew 25) Maybe this Christmas, God is calling you to start a life of giving rather than receiving. Could He be longing to hear from you, "I am the Lord's servant" and then watching you follow through by providing food for the hungry, clothes for the needy, a home for the orphan, or simply a cold cup of water to someone in His name.

Maybe He is calling you to protect. Look, let's be honest, God doesn't need you for anything. So if you are asking what would He want me to protect, then you're missing the point. Maybe God wants you to help protect those who cannot protect themselves. To risk your livelihood for those who have no life. Maybe God's calling you to protect yourself from an abusive lifestyle or relationship. Maybe God's calling you to help protect His good name by being His hands and feet in this broken world. No matter what He may be calling you to protect, I am pretty sure it will upset your plans. But good news...He loves you enough, He believes in you enough to ask you to let go of your plans and join Him in His plans.

Maybe God is calling you to praise Him! Not just to sing another song. Not just to attend church. Maybe God is calling you to really praise Him by taking steps of faith that show your respect and gratitude for our Lord.

Yes, calling is about interruption. Calling is about changing our lives in scary ways. But calling is always accompanied by joy and tears and passion and a sense of living life with purpose. What is your purpose this holiday? Better yet...what is your call this Christmas? In Jesus, Amen.