

# *Holy Interruptions*

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Psalm 33:1-12

<sup>1</sup>Rejoice in the Lord, O you righteous. Praise befits the upright. <sup>2</sup>Praise the Lord with the lyre; make melody to him with the harp of ten strings. <sup>3</sup>Sing to him a new song; play skillfully on the strings, with loud shouts. <sup>4</sup>For the word of the Lord is upright, and all his work is done in faithfulness. <sup>5</sup>He loves righteousness and justice; the earth is full of the steadfast love of the Lord. <sup>6</sup>By the word of the Lord the heavens were made, and all their host by the breath of his mouth. <sup>7</sup>He gathered the waters of the sea as in a bottle; he put the deeps in storehouses. <sup>8</sup>Let all the earth fear the Lord; let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him. <sup>9</sup>For he spoke, and it came to be; he commanded, and it stood firm. <sup>10</sup>The Lord brings the counsel of the nations to nothing; he frustrates the plans of the peoples. <sup>11</sup>The counsel of the Lord stands forever, the thoughts of his heart to all generations. <sup>12</sup>Happy is the nation whose God is the Lord, the people whom he has chosen as his heritage.

## Matthew 9:9-13, 18-26

<sup>9</sup>As Jesus was walking along, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax booth; and he said to him, “Follow me.” And he got up and followed him. <sup>10</sup>And as he sat at dinner in the house, many tax collectors and sinners came and were sitting with him and his disciples. <sup>11</sup>When the Pharisees saw this, they said to his disciples, “Why does your teacher eat with tax collectors and sinners?” <sup>12</sup>But when he heard this, he said, “Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick. <sup>13</sup>Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ For I have come to call not the righteous but sinners.” *At this point the disciples of John the Baptist interrupt Jesus with a question about the tradition of fasting and Jesus responds with a riddle about sewing new cloth and old cloth together and putting new wine in old wineskins.* <sup>18</sup>While he was saying these things to them, suddenly a leader of the synagogue came in and knelt before him, saying, “My daughter has just died; but come and lay your hand on her, and she will live.” <sup>19</sup>And Jesus got up and followed him, with his disciples. <sup>20</sup>Then suddenly a woman who had been suffering from hemorrhages for twelve years came up behind him and touched the fringe of his cloak, <sup>21</sup>for she said to herself, “If I only touch his cloak, I will be made well.” <sup>22</sup>Jesus turned, and seeing her he said, “Take heart, daughter; your faith has made you well.” And instantly the woman was made well. <sup>23</sup>When Jesus came to the leader’s house and saw the flute players and the crowd making a commotion, <sup>24</sup>he said, “Go away; for the girl is not dead but sleeping.” And they laughed at him. <sup>25</sup>But when the crowd had been put outside, he went in and took her by the hand, and the girl got up. <sup>26</sup>And the report of this spread throughout that district.

John Lennon is credited with saying, “Life is what happens to us when we are busy making other plans,” but variations of the saying are so commonly quoted it has almost become a contemporary proverb. From self-help to business management books to theological reflections on the spiritual life, we are reminded that life - as we plan it - gets interrupted. Sometimes those interruptions come by news of an unexpected health concern or accident and set in motion a season of fear and uncertainty. Sometimes they come by chance or serendipity, an unplanned discovery or shared joy, the announcement of a wedding or birth; a new job, a last-minute invitation or spontaneous decision can be a joyful interruption. Most of us, I imagine, have pretty good strategies about how to plan the day, but we never know when that interruption will necessitate our being nimble, flexible, and responsive to the moment.

Thankfully, some of these interruptions may very well lead to the authentic life we seek. The call comes out of the blue from someone who needs a listening ear during a time of trouble, and you drop everything to go and open your heart to another. A loved one dies, and the world stops revolving for a while, because we pause to grieve and make arrangements, to gather and remember, and give thanks as we begin to inhabit a whole new world. I learned a long time ago that by its nature, ministry is one interruption after another. Pastors have to plan time to read and study, to prepare sermons and classes and programs, organize meetings with church members and community partners; but by the end of most days a measure of time has been given to unexpected calls, emergencies, conflicts, happy announcements, unscheduled but important conversations in the hallway. I’m not sure our work is any different from other work in that regard, because navigating unexpected interruptions is the stuff of life.

We have Jesus to thank for that, I suppose because of the way he calls disciples to get up and go and respond to the needs of the people and world around us. Jesus also helps us understand how interruptions can be holy moments when the light of God breaks in.

This passage from Matthew's gospel is a snapshot of Jesus' ministry that is essentially a series of interruptions, one after another. Walking along, Jesus interrupts Matthew, one of those wretched tax collectors, with a call to follow. The Pharisees interrupt the disciples asking about Jesus' choice of dinner companions. Jesus overhears them and interrupts the Pharisees quoting a common proverb (*those who are well have no need of a physician*), and a word from Hosea (*I desire mercy, not sacrifice*). The lectionary reading itself is interrupted because verses 14 through 17 are omitted - and this omission is actually another interruption. The disciples of John the Baptist come to ask Jesus a question about fasting. Amid that conversation, the ruler of the synagogue interrupts Jesus with a plea that Jesus raise his dead child back to life. On his way to the girl, the hemorrhaging woman interrupts Jesus, and then Jesus interrupts the professional mourners, who have already arrived for the funeral, by raising the girl from the dead! One interruption after another, with no less than eight things going on all at once.

However, those eight different things have a common thread - the thread of life. Remember, life is what happens when you're making other plans. Through all these interruptions, the gospel writer Matthew proclaims the power of God in Jesus is breaking through all those old religious boundaries. Tax collectors were despised for working for the oppressor, the rulers in their occupied country, yet Jesus calls one of them, Matthew, to follow him. Jews did not eat with the ritually unclean and yet Jesus eats with sinners. Jewish men did not touch bleeding women, but Jesus heals the hemorrhaging woman with his touch - and to what end? So that she can give birth - life - again. No one touched a corpse after it had been prepared for burial, but Jesus touches the dead body of the girl - to what end? So that this little girl - like the woman just healed - will be able to live into her childbearing years. Each interruption of this complex little script is about Jesus giving new life.

When Matthew the tax collector - as it says in our bibles - *got up to follow Jesus*, the Greek word is *he arose*, - it's a resurrection word! The

hemorrhaging woman is *healed* with a word that means *saved*. Jesus calls her *daughter* - she is saved to be a member of his family. The dead girl, like the tax-collector, *arose*, she is raised from the dead to live!<sup>1</sup> Each interruption, you see, is really about the same thing! Through the calling of Matthew to discipleship, the healing of the woman, and the resurrection of the girl, Jesus is giving his followers life. He is raising to new life, people who will join him in doing the redemptive, healing, life-giving work of God. For all its complexity, this passage of scripture does one thing – it gives hope to the church in our time. Jesus is raising us to new life.

People who study these things say there is an overwhelming level of despair about the state of the world. And if you watch the news, it's pretty bleak. So much innocent loss of life. So much violence and warfare. So much hunger eating away at human existence. So much divisiveness and public rancor. We are ten days from the arrival of Summer, yet already the storms and the wildfires are on a tear. Some places – too much drought. Other places – too much water.

Some of us remember a time when we thought the arc of the universe was actually bending toward justice, and things were getting better for more of humankind. We long with nostalgia for that vague memory of better times that used to be. But you know what?... Jesus is never about nostalgia. Nostalgia for the way things used to be is the enemy of hope that the best is yet to be. Today's glimpse into Jesus' calling, healing, raising to new life and giving hope to all people is all about the best is yet to be.

It's making me wonder if we should be paying more attention to the interruptions that come our way. Rather than be irritated by them, maybe receive them as a sign of grace, a glimpse into the holy life to which we are called.

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<sup>1</sup> Tom Long, *Matthew: Westminster Bible Companion*.

Earlier this year, Alyona Synenko was going about her life in Nairobi where she works for the International Committee of the Red Cross. She has spent thirteen years in areas of extreme conflict as the regional spokesperson for the Red Cross, and now she is having to grapple with the tragic horror of her home in Ukraine. But one day, unexpectedly, her aunt called to tell her that her first cousin was getting married. She said the friends of the bride and groom had mostly fled the country; could she come home for her cousin's wedding? She wrote about the story under the heading, "The Glow of a Wedding amid Bombs and Blackouts."

With that one phone call, for the first time in months, the dread of uncertainty gave way to anticipation of a future of hope. She hoped the glamour of dressing up and holding flowers would challenge the emptiness of war. "Beauty brings joy," she wrote, and "I want to claim the right to something unnecessary and pretty." Admitting she was never very sentimental about weddings, she nonetheless started texting with her cousin about dresses, rings and cakes. She had to fly to Moldova, then cross the border on foot past tents set up for refugees. She found her hometown, Odessa, drained of life.

But she also realized that weddings are the promise of a future, a public vow of a shared life. She bought the most beautiful shiny, flowing red dress she could find from a Ukrainian designer, saying, "At a time when making plans seems to be a luxury few Ukrainians can afford, someone in my family was willing to take that risk, to prove that life could not be reduced to stockpiling candles and pasta... Wars create pain, uncertainty and fear, but survivors can't live on pain and fear alone. So, in the midst of war, my cousin, the groom, and six family members witnessed the vows, celebrated amid beauty and joy, proving that we believe the future is worth thinking about, and that hope is contagious." She said, "What is truly terrifying is when you get so used

to being afraid that it makes you numb to being alive. Out loud, that day, we made promises to the future.”<sup>2</sup>

Every one of Jesus’ holy interruptions in our scripture this morning is about the promise of a future of new life and hope. A tax collector becomes a disciple. Sinners are invited to the table of our Lord. A woman is healed in order to bear life again. A girl is raised from the dead to live into her childbearing years. Not one of them planned for these things to happen that day. The living Christ entered in, and interrupted their plans with the promise of life, and through them, Christ invites us to pay attention to the interruptions of our lives. They can be holy and hopeful moments when the life of God breaks in.

AMEN.

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<sup>2</sup> Alyona Synenko, “The Glow of a Wedding Amid Bombs and Blackouts,” The New York Times, 11/24/22.