

“When the Time is Wrong: Part I”

Luke 1:46-56

12.12.21

Introduction

If you tuned in to the message last week, you'll remember that we talked about the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. These two saints of God were in their golden years when they finally conceived and gave birth to a son. After years and years of waiting, God blessed them with a child: John the baptizer.

The focus of the message was on how God's timing and our timing do not always line up the way that we want. We talked about how that when we pray, sometimes God's answer is *yes*, sometimes, God's answer is *no*, and sometimes the answer is *not yet*. But most importantly, we learned that the purpose of prayer is not necessarily to ask God for what we want; rather, the purpose of prayer is to help us mature in our faith so that ultimately we want what God wants more than anything else.

Digging Deeper

The story of Mary is almost the inverse of the story of Zechariah and Elizabeth. Mary wasn't a barren woman who had waited years to become a mother. Instead, Mary was a young maiden engaged to be married. In ancient Israelite culture, marriages were arranged when a female was about twelve years old. Although Mary had probably given some thought to starting a family in the next few years, there was no societal expectation for Mary to give birth at that particular juncture in her life. In fact, quite the opposite. Mary would have been shamed for becoming pregnant out of wedlock.

Although we do read about it much in the New Testament, there were multiple rumors circulating in the second century about how Mary became pregnant. These rumors were posed by the earliest opponents of Christianity. Therefore, it would seem that Mary was inevitably ostracized once it was known that she was with child.

The Gospel of Luke tells us that Mary had never been with a man. Mary was a virgin, and the conception of Jesus was supernatural. But obviously no one in her community was going to believe her story. Undoubtedly it would have been much easier on Mary had God waited another year until she and Joseph were married before bringing the Messiah into the world.

If we learn anything from the story of these two women it is that God's timing is tricky. Sometimes it might feel like God needs to hurry up and catch up with what we think should be happening. Other times, it seems that God places something in our path that we're not quite ready to face—something totally unexpected.

Reflection

I know I've shared this story before, but it is the clearest example from my own life. About eight years ago, I was finishing up graduate school and Alisha had gone back to college to change career paths. At the time, Carter was about 3 years old.

If you see Carter now, you know he is a lovely young man. He is polite, kind, funny, smart...I'm sure you can't tell that I'm a little biased! Anyways, when Carter was 3, he wasn't quite as easy going—he was a rather difficult child.

Not only was he incredibly stubborn and prone to throwing tantrums (okay...maybe I'm describing all three-year-olds to some extent) he also suffered from severe night terrors almost every night of the week. If you're not familiar, a night terror is when a person appears to be conscious, but they are not. He would scratch us and bite us and fight us until we were able to wake him up...and then there was the lengthy process of getting him calmed down and back to sleep.

Because of the challenges we faced with Carter, we decided that we were not going to have any more children. But in January of 2014, we learned that we were going to be parents once again.

To be honest, it was difficult not to panic. In addition to having a difficult toddler, Alisha and I were both full-time students, I was commuting over 300 miles every week to work a part-time job, and needless to say, we didn't have a lot of income. We had no idea how we were going to fit a newborn baby into our already crazy life.

Then something strange happened. When we brought Emma home from the hospital, Carter turned into a completely different human. He began to live into the responsibility of being an older brother, and within a year his night terrors stopped. Don't get me wrong, diapers and formula were still an added expense, and there were a lot of sleepless nights, but God knew what we needed when we needed it.

As you might have guessed, now it is impossible to imagine life without Emma. Not only has she blessed our family tremendously, but we also believe that God has big plans for how she is going to bless the world. If God would have left it up to our choices and timing, there might have never been an Emma.

Theological Reflection

Thankfully, Mary's response was much different from mine when she heard about God's plan to bring Jesus into the world. Mary was humbled that God would consider her to be the agent to bear God's Messiah. She says,

... "My soul magnifies the Lord,⁴⁷ and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,⁴⁸ for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;⁴⁹ for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy,⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever" (Luke 1:46-55 NRSV).

There's no doubt in my mind that the rest of Mary's life was difficult. She endured judgment and shame the rest of her days, not to mention the fact that she also witnessed her precious child grow up to be treated with even greater contempt. In all likelihood Mary was shunned by her own family and experienced unimaginable ridicule, but she had the spiritual depth to recognize that something bigger was happening in her life, and God was using her as a vehicle to carry out his master plan.

Invitation

What is the unexpected hurdle you are facing in life right now? Is there something in your life that you believe is going to conquer you and so you've just decided to give up? Are you living in panic mode as you face the uncertainty?

I'm drawn to the words of Gabriel as a source of comfort: "Do not be afraid..." This is a recurring phrase throughout Scripture, and in every instance, the person receiving the divine message has every reason to be afraid. Mary is no exception. From a human perspective, she has every reason to be terrified, yet she chooses to place her trust in God—even God's unusual timing.

I don't know what you're facing right now, but whatever it is, you do not have to be afraid. The point of the story is not that Mary was strong enough to shoulder whatever came her way, the point of the story is that whatever we face in life, God is with us, and God has a bigger plan than what we can see in the moment.

It's hard for me not to think about this on a larger scale. I know you're probably tired of hearing about the pandemic, but it was a pretty unexpected shake up for the world. I can remember in February of 2020 as news of the virus was just beginning to surface on other continents, Americans were cracking jokes about the "Corona-virus" on social media.

At that point in time, it felt distant. It was easy for us to feel invincible. We live in the twenty first century and we have made more scientific advancements in the last couple

of the decades than in the last few centuries combined. And yet, this virus, which will eventually be viewed in the same way that we think of the flu, has shaken the core of our civilization.

One of the hardest parts of life is change and the pandemic has forced us to change. Interestingly, when we read Scripture, we discover that the central message of the Bible is change. God wants to change the world, and more specifically, God wants to change the world by changing our lives.

It's easy for us to get comfortable and complacent with the way things are. In fact, it is easy for us to idolize the status quo. As a result, from time to time we discover that God allows our lives to be disrupted; otherwise, we would never take the initiative to make necessary changes. Disruption wakes us up and causes us to question our values and priorities. Divine interruptions give us the opportunity to consider how we spend our time and our money, how we treat other people, if we're actively growing in our relationship with God, if we are serving ourselves more than we are serving other people, and the list goes on.

The theological term for responding to God's invitation to change is "repentance," and believe it or not, the invitation to repent is almost always directed toward the people of God rather than those on the outside. And contrary to popular ideas, repentance usually doesn't just involve saying a prayer and asking God for forgiveness; repentance is the difficult work of turning around and traveling in the opposite direction.

I do not believe that God caused the pandemic, but I think the pandemic has the opportunity to help us change direction, in our individual lives and as a society as a whole. It has already changed the way that we do business, the way that we get educated, and even the way that we worship and carry out the mission of the church. Perhaps instead of resisting change and trying to rush back to the way things used to be we should consider what God is trying to do in the world.

Just as Mary was God's agent to bear Christ in the world two-thousand years ago, God meant for each of us to be alive right now during this strange season in life, that we too might bear the living Christ in the world. God's invitation to Mary is the same invitation being extended to us today. Even though things might seem turned upside down, *do not be afraid*. God has a plan, and God wants us to be a part of it.

I hope you'll take the time to consider whether you're resisting or embracing the divine interruptions in your life. Are you going to trust God, even when it seems the timing is off? May we all look to Mary as our example of someone who was able to embrace the circumstances that rocked her world, trusting that somehow these unexpected challenges will eventually bear fruit for God's kingdom.

Questions for Reflection and Discussion

1. If you had to eat the same meal every day for the rest of your life, what would it be?
2. How does this week's message impact your perspective on God's timing?
3. As you reflect upon your own life, what divine disruptions have given you the opportunity to make necessary changes? What have these interruptions taught you about God and life in general?
4. The words "Do not be afraid" have power. Who do you know that needs to hear these same words that Gabriel spoke to Mary? How can you speak this message into their life and be the presence of Christ during their time of need?
5. How have you witnessed God's grace recently?
6. How can we pray for you?