



November 25-26, 2017
Pastor Megan Hackman
Chapel Hill Presbyterian Church

Inviting God: Mary Luke 1:28-38

We are in a new sermon series for Advent, Inviting God. You could read that 2 different ways—Our God is an inviting God who invites us into his story; and we are also looking at how we might be inviting God more into our everyday lives. We were corrected—rightly—by those of you from the more formal church traditions that technically Advent doesn't start until next Sunday. But since we put up our Christmas trees and Christmas is just on the horizon, we're launching into this season of waiting this weekend. Okay?

Our first story in the Inviting God series is of Mary. Now I don't want you to think that just because I'm the female pastor on staff, I drew Mary. That's not the way we think around here. But the first to hear the news from heaven that God is coming to earth were one man and two women, and let's just say, the ladies handled the interruption of their lives a lot better than the man. Here's a super sexist generalization I'm going to make—the ladies are just better at being interrupted, okay?

We're in Luke 1 today. Our Christmas story starts with divine interruption. And my prayer for Chapel Hill this Advent is that we would not stiff arm any interruption that God has for us, but that we would be inviting God to interrupt our everyday lives.

Let me tell you how our man responds to God's interruption – The beginning of Luke opens with Zechariah. The angel, Gabriel, appears to him and says he's going to have a son who will prepare the way for Jesus. His response is a question that reveals that he's having a hard time believing what the angel has said. So the angel takes away his ability to speak. The response to interruption #1 ... not so good.

Then we have the two future moms. Elizabeth is the first. She is Zechariah's wife. And while she doesn't get visited by an angel, Zechariah somehow signs her the message about what's happening, and she and Zechariah do conceive. She is invited into God's story. And then there's the second future mom, Mary. She gets visited by the same angel that came to Zechariah. He also tells Mary that she will have a son. Let's pick up the reading with this proclamation:

READ Luke 1:28-38. Gabriel came to Mary and said,
"Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" 29 But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. 30 And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. 31 And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. 32 He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, 33 and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."
34 And Mary said to the angel, "How will this be, since I am a virgin?"
35 And the angel answered her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. 36 And

behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. 37 For nothing will be impossible with God." 38 And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word." And the angel departed from her.

Pray.

Let's look at how this interruption unfolded for Mary. First there was the proclamation: Gabriel announced that God is with Mary. That she is chosen, full of grace, favored of God. Now Mary is a young, engaged, totally ordinary Jewish woman. So having an angel visit with a divine proclamation was clearly perplexing. So the angel addresses her fear and confusion and repeats his proclamation. "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God." God knows her by name. And he has a marvelous plan he is inviting Mary into. It's the plan for her son, a child she will bear in her own womb. A son she will name Jesus. He will be great and will be the Son of the Most High.

After this, Mary finds her voice. She responds, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel offers her an explanation and proof that what he says is true. We've had a proclamation, perplexion, and now a proof. (You like my P's? I've learned from the best.) Here's the proof. It's 2-fold: First, he tells her that this conception will be a work of the Holy Spirit when the Most High overshadows her. It's a critical distinction here for the Christian faith that Mary is a virgin. That just as when God formed Adam and breathed life into him, without physical intercourse, so Jesus came from heaven to earth without Mary having a male partner. This is a miracle, a divine work that God is doing.

This truly is perplexing (it certainly hasn't happened before or since!), so the angel invites Mary to see a second proof that God really is inviting her to be the mother of the Son of God. He goes on to say, look around, it's true! God is preparing for his Son to come, and he's doing other miracles. Look what's happening with Elizabeth! This is such a gracious inclusion to me, that Gabriel would point this perplexed, ordinary young woman whose life is getting crazy interrupted and not all in positive ways—imagine the rumor mills!—Gabriel points Mary to someone she already knows and to how God has interrupted her life, too.

I was so encouraged last week at MOPS. Our speaker, Kelly Welk, shared about how God has invited her into his story using the ordinary place she lives in and the ordinary things she loves to do. Now she runs a business that's able to donate significant funds to end sex trafficking. Her website is really impressive, and she looks like she has it all together. But she reminded us that what we see now was born out of many very ordinary afternoons at home with 3 kids under 5 making a mess in the kitchen while she played with recipes just to keep her sanity and a sense of what she loved to do. She encouraged those of us in the midst of daily chores to dream. But it's really hard to dream about how God might use your daily life for something extraordinary when you're in a season of everyday slog. Maybe you can appreciate that—it's hard to dream on God's scale when you perform the same surgery repeatedly or clean the same rooms or answer the same questions. But was so encouraged this week to have someone who has been here, done this, and God has worked something incredible and dream-worthy out of real ordinariness.

Our lives can feel very ordinary and not on God's Kingdom scale. So it's hard to believe God might interrupt us where we are, doing what is normal life, to do something that will change history. But that's when we back to Zechariah and Elizabeth. They were already 6 months into expecting John who was clearly part of God's plan for thousands of years as they could see right there in the Old Testament. So Gabriel sent Mary to someone else whose life was being interrupted so that she could

see the proof of his proclamation, that God really was interrupting her life with a crazy, huge miracle: "For nothing will be impossible with God."

And that seals it for Mary. Martin Luther said there were 3 miracles of the Christmas story: "That God became a man, that a virgin conceived, and that Mary believed. And the last was the greatest."

How was that 2-fold proof—the promise of the Holy Spirit and what was happening with Elizabeth—how was that enough for an ordinary girl from a small town to believe that God was inviting her to play a significant role in the unfolding of his plan for all of human history? I wonder if you would find that to be sufficient proof?

What if I were to tell you that what happened to Mary is supposed to happen every day now? Not a miraculous virgin birth of the savior of the world—we only needed one; but the miracle of God inviting you to play a significant role in the unfolding of his plan for all of human history?

Follow with me back through the outline of this story—proclamation, perplexion, and proof—let's trace what I believe is still true. God wants to interrupt our lives and invite us into his story.

First, Gabriel's proclamation about Jesus is still true: Jesus is great and is the Son of the Most High and the Lord God has given to him the throne of his father, David, and he does reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there is no end. That is True today! That son was born to Mary, God called from heaven in the presence of many witnesses to declare that Jesus was his Son. Jesus lived and died and was resurrected and is seated on the throne until he comes again. God's proclamation is our new normal.

Second, we are still perplexed. The world that I look around and see—it's a hot mess! How will it be that Jesus will really reign? How will it be that this divine Kingdom that Jesus proclaimed to set people free, to open eyes that are blind, good news to the poor, a proclamation that Jesus will go on to say, "Today this is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4:18-21)... How's that going to come about?

This is where I get really excited. The proof that Gabriel gave Mary is the same language, the same proof, that Jesus gives just before he goes back to heaven that he really is who he says he is. Are you ready for this?

Remember what Gabriel told Mary for how this proclamation will happen? Verse 35: "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you."

Now, turn with me to the end of Luke's Gospel, Luke 24:46. I'll begin there because here we have Jesus giving his divine proclamation, just as Gabriel gave his. Here we go, "Thus, it is written, that the Christ should suffer and on the third day rise from the dead, and that repentance and forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations, beginning from Jerusalem. You are witnesses of these things." Allow me to insert the disciples asking, "How will this be?" Verse 48: "And behold, I am sending the promise of my Father upon you. But stay in the city until you are clothed with power from on high." (Are you excited yet?)

Let me read a bit more, from the first chapter of Acts; it's Luke Part II. Jesus restates this same promise in verse 8, "But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth."

Do you see the parallels with Mary?? There's a divine proclamation of what is really happening in our world. Jesus is God! And he's in control! And there's the perplexed response, the confusion, the question—how will this be? And then there's the proof: by the power of the Holy Spirit coming down. Coming down on Mary to give birth to Jesus. AND! Amazing! The power of the Holy Spirit coming upon US!

When the Holy Spirit interrupted Mary's life, that was certainly a first; now the Holy Spirit interrupting our lives is supposed to be normative!

Here's the proof that Jesus is on the throne: The Holy Spirit has come upon us. The power of the Most High is upon the people who follow Jesus. Don't forget where we've been in Romans—God's love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us. The first proof. And the second! Just as Mary was not alone in being invited into God's story—you aren't alone either. I have been invited, too, into the power of God. So let me take Elizabeth's place and testify! God is interrupting our lives all the time! As your pastor, I have a privileged front-row seat. I got to share Thanksgiving with one of our deacons, Colleen Simpson, who prays over every prayer request that comes through on these cards. Sometimes that is daunting. But she gave me this picture: the hundreds of you who put in prayer requests for God to work miracles—you're all sitting right here, next to each other. Each of you, forgive me, looking pretty ordinary. But your lives are anything but ordinary! Thanksgiving Eve, at the service, Gus & Debbie Hillman testified to God resurrecting what they thought was a dead marriage. The Kalkwarf's are out there. They have had a miracle in a daughter and granddaughter who pulled through a very frightening birth. I met last weekend with a young woman who has just begun her own life of faith and will be baptized here soon! She told me that it was a miracle that she was even alive to talk to me Saturday night. Not every miracle is a virgin birth. Each of us have dead places that Jesus can and even has brought back to life! We are the continuation of God's divine story.

I am saying this to you now. Hear the proclamation: Jesus is the eternal Son of God. He sits on the throne in heaven, and he is returning to earth. It's okay if you are perplexed! Ask God! Ask people who know God. How can this be? I offer you this proof: the Word of God and my own testimony. And the testimony of this church. Nothing is impossible with God.

Mary believed God and responded with a beautiful declaration. "I am a servant of the Lord," says Mary. It's the same title Paul assumes in the opening words of Romans: *doulos*, servant. That understanding that she is the *doulos*, the servant of God, lets her ordinary life be completely interrupted.

Being a servant means I'm command-able. There is a higher authority. I'm not the final authority on my schedule or my task list. It's not my 10 10-year plan. I'm a servant. I'm willing – and excited!—to participate in what God is doing in the world. There's my last P for how we are invited into God's story: Participation.

Are you participating in what God is doing in the world? Do you believe that this proclamation about Jesus is true today? That He really is in charge of the world? Have you invited the Holy Spirit to come in power upon you to be the witness of God? God's primary witnesses today are still leading ordinary lives: moms, carpenters, fisherman, teachers. But when you participate with the Spirit, when you say, "I am a servant of the Lord," then the most extraordinary interruptions can happen in your life.

For those of you who know Jesus and would say right now, yes! I am a servant of the Lord -- I invite you to put some dream energy this Advent into this question: How God might uniquely use you in

your ordinary, everyday life to participate in God's global story? Can you, like Kelly, turn cooking food into a way to feed hungry people and send money that sets people free? The Holy Spirit's really creative! I'd love to see what you come up with.

If you don't know Jesus, I want to invite you to seek out the proofs that Gabriel put forward—. First, you can talk to God directly! Ask the Holy Spirit to come upon you in power and to reveal himself. Second, be like Mary going to Elizabeth. Ask someone you think knows Jesus—Ask, "What's the proof in your life that God is at work?"

We're working diligently to prepare a place for those kind of conversations right here at Chapel Hill in January. We'll be presenting Alpha which is a place to explore the questions of God around meals in a non-threatening environment. I ask everyone here, right now: Write down the name of someone you want to invite to come and talk about God. You'll be hearing more about that in the weeks to come.

But I challenge you to have a conversation with them this Advent. This might be your opening line, "You might not believe this, but I'd love to share what I see God doing in my life." When Mary and Elizabeth first saw each other, the Holy Spirit already told Elizabeth what was going on, so she wasn't surprised. But imagine the first time Mary told one of her normal Jewish friends, "You might not believe this, but I'd love to share what God is doing in my life." I wonder if that friend could have believed her. But if she could, she would have been invited into the most amazing story that God is still writing. The story of Jesus, the story of dead places coming alive, the story of earth looking more like heaven, and of us looking more like the God who loves us.

Let's invite the Holy Spirit to interrupt our lives this Advent.