

# WORSHIP

Sermon | 1.21.2018



## Holy Interruptions

By the Reverend Kathrine Kerr

Mark 1:14-20

I don't know about you, but I had a plan for this week. Following the MLK holiday on Monday, and anticipating preaching today, I had charted out what seemed to me to be a decent strategy for navigating what needed to be done- I had appointments and meetings carefully written into slots on my calendar, a plan for preparing for a bible study, and a decent -sized list of things that needed to get done. It was going to be tight, but it was doable.

And then it snowed. Schools closed, the church closed, and all of the appointments on my calendar got cancelled, postponed, or rescheduled.

While the joy from the under 16 set was palpable, the response from those of us with a few years on us was mixed. Snow days interrupt our daily routines. They can be very challenging for some- those who won't get paid because of lost work time, those whose jobs call them out in frozen and treacherous conditions, those who need to navigate the bad weather for medical care.

But for many people, there is something kind of nice about the interruption. Having to stay inside, being unable to get out and run all the errands or attend all the meetings or do all the things, can be annoying and frustrating, but it can also be calming. Reorienting. Welcome.

Now, I'm a Floridian by birth and nurture, and as such, I believe I have particularly thin blood. I don't love being cold, and other than admiring its natural beauty from the comfort of a warm space, I'm not that crazy about snow. But I do love a snow day. I love the forced slowing down, the sudden shrinking of the schedule, the necessary turning inward to the home, the family, those things that are immediate and accessible.



On a snow day, everything may not stop, but many things have to be shifted, sometimes creativity must be employed to accomplish what needs to be accomplished, and occasionally it becomes clear that what we thought had to be accomplished actually doesn't. Snow days offer many of us a much-needed pause in the midst of overscheduled, overstimulated lives.

At home with my husband and our daughter, I was still able to do some of the work that needed to be done. But I played with Caroline, and we made cookies. We read and we rested. I even ventured out into the cold to join neighbors and friends at the park for sledding, snow angels and snowball fights.

I enjoyed the interruption to my scheduled week, and emerged from it with good memories and some new perspective, which is a gift that sometimes comes from interruptions. As much as they may throw us, as little as we look forward to them, as challenging as they can sometimes be, interruptions are a part of our lives, and they often have much to teach us and much to offer.

The late Dutch priest and theologian Henri Nouwen once told of a conversation he had with a wise, experienced professor he knew at Notre Dame. The two were strolling the campus when the professor mused to Nouwen, "You know, my whole life I have been complaining that my work was constantly interrupted, until I realized that the interruptions were my work."

I wonder what Simon and Andrew, James and John thought of the interruption to their daily lives that Jesus presented. Because, let's be honest, it was an interruption. These four men, these future disciples, were fishermen, out at the sea of Galilee doing what they did- casting their nets to haul in fish. And they weren't alone.

The Sea of Galilee at the time was home to a "substantial fishing industry" made up of everything from subsistence fishermen with limited resources who were seeking to provide for their families, to larger operations complete with boats and hired workers, who caught huge amounts of fish for sale in market and export as far away as Egypt. From what Mark tells us, we can assume that Simon and Andrew fit somewhere near the first category, as they stood on the shore casting their nets, and James and John fit somewhere in the second category, as they were in a boat with their father and the other workers. Four men from different walks of life, who had this in common: they were at work.



They weren't following Jesus around, waiting to be noticed. They weren't even looking for Jesus. They weren't in seminary preparing for a call to ministry, or in the Temple praying or overseeing purification rites. They were regular guys, just doing their jobs. The noted biblical scholar William Barclay remarked, "no one ever believed in the ordinary man as Jesus did," and these four men were ordinary men.

But Jesus sought them out, came to them where they were, and with no sales pitch, no fancy words, no promise of raises and competitive benefits packages, simply said, "follow me, and I will make you fish for people."

So Simon and Andrew dropped their nets, and James and John left their father, and they all went with Jesus.

This has always been the part of the story that has awed and amazed me. These four regular guys were just minding their business – literally – when they were interrupted by this man, Jesus, told to follow him, and they did. Right away. They didn't ask any questions, they didn't negotiate terms, they didn't make a list of the pros and the cons. They followed.

In hindsight, we can appreciate the importance of that interruption, and hope that we, too, would have the strength and courage to drop everything and follow Jesus when he calls. But I can't help but wonder what it was like for those first disciples to hear the invitation and then to walk away from everything they knew to follow this itinerant teacher into a completely unknown future.

Had they even heard of him before? Mark tells us that, before Jesus called these disciples, he had come to Galilee from Judea, "proclaiming the good news of God." But he doesn't tell us whether Simon, Andrew, James and John had heard the preaching. He doesn't tell us whether they were searching for something more than their lives as fishermen, whether one of them had recently had a spiritual experience or whether they spent their days in conversation about the coming Messiah, Temple politics, or getting out of that sleepy fishing village.

One commentator I read remarked on the scarcity of details in this story. He wrote, "[b]iblical stories often frustrate us by refusing to provide all the details we desire." Unlike novelists who often painstakingly describe every inch of a scene, every expression on a face, every thought running through the protagonist's head, the gospel writers aren't known for their



character and plot development.

The point of the gospels is proclamation, and so the specific details of the stories are less important than is the message the stories convey.

And in this story, the message is clear. Mark spells it out in verse 15: “the time is fulfilled and the Kingdom of God has come near.” This is the good news, and it is what Mark wants his reader to pay attention to. So he might be a little short on details about the characters in his story, but we can forgive him, because his focus is elsewhere. He’s not as concerned with the new disciples’ background as he is on what is coming- for them, and for all of us.

As New Testament scholar and President of Union Presbyterian Seminary Brian Blount explains, in Mark’s gospel, “Jesus reveals a God who breaks into human time in an effort to repair the breach separating God from humans and humans from one another.” Jesus is God’s holy interruption into human existence. And that is good news.

In 1973, two professors at Princeton Seminary conducted a study that involved forty students. The researchers gathered the students in small groups in a room in one building and had them complete a questionnaire. Once they did that, they were instructed to leave the building they were in and walk to a different building, where they were either to give a talk on jobs or on the parable of the Good Samaritan. All of the students were told get to where they were expected quickly, but to different degrees- some were simply told to go quickly while others were rushed and told that time was of the essence, and they must hurry.

On their way to the second building, each student was confronted by the sight of a person hunched over in an alley, clearly in need of help. And this is where the study really happened. The researchers weren’t interested in the questionnaires the students filled out in the first building or the classes they taught in the second. They wanted to know what the students would do when confronted with a fellow human being in need between the two buildings.

And what they found was interesting. Of the forty participants in the study, roughly 40% stopped to speak or offer assistance to the person in need. But only 10% of those who were in the “high hurry” category stopped.

The researchers found that it didn’t really matter what the students believed their mission was- whether they were going to teach a class on jobs or on the Good Samaritan. The most telling factor in whether or not they would stop to help a stranger in need was the degree to



which they believed themselves to be in a hurry. Whether or not they wanted to stop and help a fellow human in need, it was clear that those who thought they were in a big hurry perceived their stated activity to be more important than this interruption.

We all do it. We all get ourselves going, doing whatever it is we believe needs doing, thinking that the level of importance we give our tasks is their level of importance. Whether we're rushing to work or to school, to volunteer or to vacation, to spin class or art class, to run carpool or run errands, our lives are all too often marked by imagining what it will take to get ourselves from point a to point b and then gunning our engines. We believe that we control our time, and we are going to make the most of it. And then an interruption comes.

Interruptions are a part of our daily lives, there's no getting around it. They can be situational, like snow days or emotional, like sudden loss. They can be minor, like a child's incessant questions when you're just trying to get out the door in the morning, or major, like a child's incessant questions when you're just trying to get out the door in the morning. They can range from the annoyance of a traffic jam to the awe of a beautiful sunset, from the desperate cry of a person in need to the persistent call of God's gracious love to a hardened heart.

It's impossible to know whether Simon and Andrew, James and John would have decided on their own to follow Jesus. What we know is that Jesus interrupted their lives, called them, and they responded, giving us a powerful example of how to respond to life's interruptions.

Now, I know that a good argument can be made that not every interruption comes from God. But what might change if we started acting like they did? If we truly believe that nothing in our human experience is outside of God's power and grace, then isn't it possible that any interruption, even the most insignificant seeming one, has the potential to provide opportunities for us to experience and respond to God?

The theologian John Wesley coined the term "prevenient grace" to describe the process through which God's grace interrupts our lives to show us how much we want God's grace. No human being comes to God's grace out of the blue or on our own, he argued, but God, through grace, interrupts our lives in order to draw us to God's grace.

Viewed in the light of God's grace, even the slightest interruption could be a nudging of the Holy Spirit. A snow day could be a reminder to slow down and appreciate the wonder of



God's creation. A child's "why?" could be a reminder to see them and to embrace their innocence and curiosity. A person asking for help on the side of the road could be a reminder of our calling to love our neighbor as ourselves. An unexpected call from the church's Officer Nominating Committee could open the door to a new path of service that you hadn't contemplated before.

We can't avoid interruptions. But we can think about how we respond to them. We can roll our eyes, check our watches, feel annoyed at the productivity that just got cut off, or we can pause and take a breath, sit for a moment and listen. Because we never know when- or how- God might break into our lives and call us to follow.

