

“Worship interrupted”  
Westminster Presbyterian Church  
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*Psalm 71:1-6 and Luke 13:10-17*

by Rev. Patrick D. Heery

Every night, we read several stories to Emerson before going to bed. Here’s how I imagined this going (before I had kids and became a cynic): Emerson sitting in my lap, listening intently to the story, captivated, occasionally gazing into my eyes as his imagination and wisdom and empathy lit up like fireworks. Now to reality: a squirming boy interrupts the story to whip me in the face with a toy, to show me his somersaults, to ask for a glass of water, to tell me he’s hungry, to ask me the name of some random character on the page (I don’t know), to ask me what’s going to happen to that person (why don’t we read the story and find out?). And it’s not the interruptions about the story that get to me; at least those show he is engaging and curious. I welcome that. Most of the time. It’s the interruptions that have nothing to do with the story: an endless stream of consciousness that would give James Joyce a run for his money.

I feel like Seinfeld’s Frank Costanza shouting, with arms in the air, “Serenity now!”

And of course, sometimes the vision does come true—just enough to keep me going.

But that’s children, right? Interruptions. Anyone remember the viral video of a professor giving an interview for BBC News in his home office, when his toddler bursts in and starts dancing next to him, followed by his baby in her rolling chair, as his wife scrambles to drag the kids out of the video?

Life with children just never goes as planned. And I’m a planner. As some church people can attest, I can become a cranky pants when things don’t go according to plan.

Life is full of them. Interruptions! Distractions! They are constant. The text messages, the social media notifications, the emails, the people who stop by unannounced, the unexpected projects, the endless stream of your house falling apart, the sore throat that tells you you’re getting a cold. And that’s just the little stuff. What about the things that disrupt, derail, implode your life’s most important goals? From small to big, interruptions can be infuriating. We want to feel in control. We want to feel some measure of certainty and comfort. And those feelings extend to church too. So when someone interrupts our worship, or goes on a tangent in a Bible study, or asks for help we’re not prepared to give, or makes us uncomfortable, or disrupts any aspect of our carefully planned but barely-holding-it-together existence, we get upset. Understandably so.

Yes, we know the old saying, “We plan, and God laughs,” but surely that doesn’t apply to us decently and orderly Presbyterians! We plan so well!

Indeed, an interruption is exactly what happens one day in worship for Jesus and his fellow worshippers. A woman who has struggled with a crippling condition for 18 years enters the

sanctuary, mid-sermon. For 18 years, she has been bent over, unable to see the sun, the sky, the stars—to see the path before her. She is no stranger to these folks. I imagine not a few think to themselves, “Oh great, here she is again! Late as usual. Interrupting the sermon. What will she say this time? Can’t we just listen in peace?” And of course the interruption goes deeper. Her tragedy challenges their faith in a good and loving God. Her uncleanness disrupts the comfort and uniformity of their community. Her lament disrupts their joy.

Jesus sees this woman, and he has a choice to make. He can continue with worship as planned, or he can stop and help her.

There’s a lot at stake in this decision. This is the Sabbath, and according to one tradition in Scripture (Exodus 20:8-11), people are supposed to rest on the Sabbath, because God rested on the final day of creation, blessed the Sabbath, and commanded people to refrain from all work. Healing is work. Now, this tradition wasn’t cruel. It said that the Sabbath could be broken in order to save someone’s life. But the woman in today’s story was in no mortal danger. She’d been dealing with this problem for 18 years. Surely she could wait another day.

Except, as Jesus well knows, this woman *has* been waiting. She’s been waiting 18 years. How many times has she been told to wait, to keep silent, just to trust that everything will work out? And here stands the Messiah, the incarnation of God, everything they told her to believe in, and she’s supposed to wait? She’s supposed to bear one more day of agony?

Jesus makes his decision. He stops in the middle of worship. He speaks to her. He heals her. Luke says he sets her free.

The pastor stands up and rebukes both Jesus and the woman for their interruption. Luke describes a powerful anger rising in the pastor and many of the parishioners. The Greek word here for “indignant” has its root in “agony.”<sup>1</sup> They are in agony. This is not how it’s supposed to be done.

Jesus gets mad right back at them and says, *Don’t you see? This person, this healing, that you interpret as an interruption is actually the whole reason you’re here. This is why Sabbath worship exists in the first place: to claim this woman as a “daughter of Abraham” and set her free.*

Jesus is referencing another tradition in the Torah, which says that the Sabbath is a remembrance of the people’s exodus from slavery in Egypt (Deuteronomy 5:12-15). From this perspective, the Sabbath isn’t about refraining from work; it’s about engaging in a singular kind of work: the work of freeing God’s people, of sharing with others what we ourselves have received. When Jesus heals this woman, he frees her, not only of her ailment, but of the stigma, isolation, and despair that it brought her.

Jesus implies that interruptions are not inherently bad. They can be. But they can also be a divine invitation. An opportunity. A grace.

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<sup>1</sup> Rob Myallis, ἀγανακτων (aganakton, meaning "indignant", 13.14)

Hebrews 13:2: “Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for by doing that some have entertained angels without knowing it.”

The first thing this woman does after being healed is stand up and praise God. She worships. The interruption added to the worship, not subtracted. In fact, Luke even tells us in another chapter that Jesus’ disciples included “some women who had been cured of evil spirits and infirmities” (8:2-3). Maybe this woman even goes on to become a disciple of Christ.

And they think Jesus should have stuck to the plan. He did! Just not theirs.

The question then is: How do we know whether to embrace or reject an interruption?

Because, again, not all interruptions are good. Sometimes they are distractions from what’s important, and we need to focus. Too many distractions, and this sermon wouldn’t have gotten written (and trust me there were plenty); we wouldn’t have all those great works of art, or feats of engineering, or athletic prowess. *Love* requires focus. When I’m providing pastoral care to someone, I can’t be checking my phone or responding to everyone who walks through the door; my focus has to be entirely on the person in front of me.

If we entertained every interruption, we’d become entirely ineffectual, burnt out, and captive to a flurry of others’ competing, contradicting expectations. That’s people pleasing, not God pleasing.

Sometimes interruptions are important, but what we’re doing is equally important, and we have to make a choice. And sometimes, as in our story today, they are holy, calling us to something or someone *more* important, and we have to answer—even when it means letting go of our plans, even when it’s agonizing.

So, how do we know the difference? We know by asking whether this interruption deepens or detracts from our calling. Jesus knew his calling; he spoke it the very first day in the synagogue: “God has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, and recovery of sight to the blind, to set free those who are oppressed” (Luke 4:18). Clearly, healing and freeing this woman was an interruption that deepened the purpose of Jesus and the Sabbath.

But Jesus tells another story elsewhere in which a man interrupts worship to praise himself and to shame others (Luke 18:9-14). Jesus criticizes this man. This is not an interruption to be embraced, because this act of pride and judgment doesn’t further the purpose of worship.

This means that we have to know our callings. We are not called to everything or everyone. Our callings can change over time. We can have multiple callings at once (a job, a family, a friend, a volunteer). We have to know what our purpose is, in worship, in career, in relationships, in discipleship, in life. So, if our purpose in worship, for instance, is to love God and neighbor, then we ask whether this interruption helps us do that, or draws us into competing purposes.

Interruptions are holy when they reconnect us with our purpose.

It was holy when God interrupted the plans of Mary and Joseph, when an angel sang to shepherds in a field, when a star led magi far from home, when Jesus asked fishermen to drop their nets and follow him, when Jesus loved the people whose pain had led them to believe God had forgotten about them, when Jesus drove out the money changers and defied the expectations of a Messiah, when he spoke Mary's name at the grave, when he called to Paul on the road to Damascus, when the Good Samaritan encountered a stranger in need, when Christ interrupted death itself.

Not all interruptions are Christ, but sometimes they are. May we all, even grumpy plan-obsessed pastors, pay attention. **Amen.**