

“Life Interrupted”

Luke 8:40-56

Series: Outlaws and Outcasts Week 4. The Woman in the Crowd

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Sometimes your best laid plans get interrupted.

While Lisa was expecting our second child, we made the usual list of boys and girls names. By process of elimination, we finally arrived at two choices. For the girl’s name, I like Jennifer and Lisa prefers Kristin. We go back and forth on this during the final weeks. The only way to solve this impasse is a formula. If the child is a girl born on an odd number day her name is Jennifer, if even, then Kristin. Good that settles it.

When Lisa finally feels the contractions in the wee hours of the morning, I pack her bags, carry our sleeping Peter over to the neighbors, and drive her to the hospital. While signing the hospital registration form I notice the date: the 27th – an odd day. I win! Jennifer it is. When I arrive upstairs at her room I hear her calling my name. Rushing to her side I ask, “What is it honey? Do you want me to time a contraction?” “No” “Adjust your pillows?” “No” “Should I call the nurse?” “No” “Well then why did you call me?” With pleading eyes she asks, “If it’s a girl, could we please name her Kristin?” At 11:06 a.m. on this day, August 27, 30 years ago, our daughter was born. And when I held that little tiny baby in my arms, I just knew she was Kristin Marie. My plan was interrupted and I’m glad.

Interruptions: they are not always so pleasant. They usually come at the worst time. Nobody plans an interruption, yet they urgently scream for your attention. An interruption is an intrusion, a disruption, even an obstruction: something gets in your way or detours you out of your way. Interruptions prevent you from going forward and can even set you back, permanently. Most interruptions put you on hold, where you wait and wait and wait.

I’ve had my sermons interrupted...not just by Tony Armento. My daughter Kristin has actually texted me while I am preaching. When I asked why she said, “Oh, I didn’t think you were busy. Sorry.” During another sermon years ago our organist Becky Klientop was sitting in the second pew when she let out a scream. Out of the corner of my eye I glanced over and saw some commotion. I thought to myself, “Should I stop? Is she okay?” I later learned the cause of Becky’s outburst was a spider. It’s a tricky question for a pastor – do I stop my sermon and call attention to what might be nothing? Yet if I don’t stop I might be guilty of ignoring a critical condition. When I was in seminary I attended a Thanksgiving eve service in my hometown. An Associate Pastor from another church was giving the sermon when a lady passed out in a pew. Her family ran for help. The Rescue squad came into the sanctuary with a stretcher, placed her on it and raced away. When all the dust settled, I turned back to the front of the church to discover the preacher kept preaching through that entire drama...never stopping once. My wife said, “Well Associate Pastors don’t get to preach much. You have to make the most of it.”

Much of my ministry is spent caring for interrupted people. You finally feel at home in this community when the news of a sudden move arises. Perhaps you are dealing with the interruption of your career - a job change or a layoff. A friendship you counted on is starting to

fracture. You love your family, but you wish sometimes that they would stop interrupting you and give you some peace. You said, "I do 'til death do us part" but now your marriage is parting. The parent who raised and cared for you now needs special care that you can't provide. When I visit in the hospital I see many lives interrupted.

Jesus faced interruptions. As He moves about the Galilee, preaching, teaching and healing, the crowds are growing ever greater. The minute he lands on the western shore of Galilee, a multitude is waiting. As He steps ashore, a sudden wave of human need crashes on the beach. "Open my eyes, Lord." "No me first, it's taken me five days to limp here." "Wait in line you." The disciples have had enough of people. They hang back by the boat. Not Jesus. He wades into the crowd and, with his powerful touch, calms the raging seas of human anguish. To the disciples, the masses are an interruption in their path. To Jesus, they are opportunities, not obstacles.

On this day a painful interruption will occur. Two lives collide, one interrupting the other. And because of that break in the action, one will live, the other will die.

Both stories start twelve years earlier. A nameless woman is stricken. Her time of the month arrives...and never leaves. The continual loss of blood makes her weak, anemic, pale. The physical symptoms are terrible. Yet there is something more excruciating. According to the Law of Moses in Leviticus 15, she is also spiritually unclean. She cannot go to the Temple or synagogue. She cannot touch or be touched by anyone without passing on her impurity. Her bed, chair, clothes, and house become carriers of the contagion.

She is an outcast. Like Adam and Eve who live outside Eden, like Moses a fugitive in the desert, like David hiding in caves from Saul, this woman is alone. Yet unlike them she is utterly alone in the middle of a crowd. She did nothing to deserve this. She did not give in to temptation, murder an Egyptian or embarrass the King. All she does is bleed. For a dozen years, the pleasures of work and worship, marriage, family and friends are denied her. The story of these ten and two years reads like a medical insurance claim form: one doctor after another practicing a mixture of folk remedies. Second, third, and fourth opinions only relieve her of her life savings. Life itself is draining away from her and no one can save her. Her life is one large interruption.

In the same year her blood began to flow, the healthy cry of a child brings a smile to the face of Jairus. The prominent, respected man rushes into the house like a giddy fool to behold the birth of his daughter. From that moment on she is the love of his life. To outsiders, Jairus is the serious, pious, head of the local synagogue. But for a dozen years, his only daughter wraps Daddy around her little finger. He would risk everything, even his reputation, for her. That day comes as she crosses the imperceptible line between girl and woman. In her twelfth year a strange disease seizes the beloved child. Her health declines rapidly, leaving Jairus desperate for a doctor.

Two lives interrupted: a woman dying a slow death, a child dying a rapid one before she has a chance to become a woman. These interruptions call for desperate measures. Jairus and the woman each take a risky step. The respected ruler of the synagogue throws himself down at the poor Carpenter's feet. A week ago he may have questioned, debated, even dismissed the new

Prophet. But now is not the time for theological dissertations. "My daughter is dying," he begs, "Come and heal her." At the same moment the woman starts to push her way into the crowd. She knows full well that everyone who brushes against her in the jostling commotion becomes unclean making them unfit to attend Temple or synagogue and requiring them to go through rituals of purification. Yet it no longer matters for she knows this is her last hope. It's foolish for her to believe this new healer can do any better. Yet she hears the reports about him. He is a holy man. And she reasons if her clothes are unclean, His clothes must be clean. If she can just touch the hem of his cloak and run off, no one would be wiser.

Jesus follows as Jairus clears the crowd. "Get out of the way! Emergency! Move!" But then Jesus stops. "Who touched me?" "I have no idea rabbi," replies Jairus, "but let's go before my daughter dies." "Who touched me?" Jesus turns to the crowd. "Look around you Master," Peter motions to the crowd, "everyone touched you. We are drowning in a sea of people." "Someone touched me," He persists. People in the crowd back off, shrug, look at each other. Jairus pulls on Jesus' sleeve, "Please Rabbi, there is no time for this." Then the Master's eyes fix on the woman, "Someone touched me for I felt power radiate from me."

She is exposed. Shaking and trembling, she falls at his feet. Her sin is revealed. The whole story comes tumbling out. She has made everyone unclean. The crowd begins to rumble with anger. But then they notice her once pale cheeks are aflame with color. "When I touched the fringe of your coat, the blood ceased." She expects an angry rebuke for stealing this healing. But instead she hears Jesus gently say, "My garment did not save you. Your faith in me made you clean. Go in peace."

The crowd parts, amazed, as she returns to her village. Jairus, though, is beside himself. He is about to scream at the man to move it, when a familiar face appears. It is a servant from his house. A dread silence falls. "Jairus, your daughter is dead. Do not trouble the Teacher anymore." The father falls to his knees and wails in anguish. "If only you hadn't stopped for that woman, she might still be alive." The interruption cost his daughter her life. Jesus lays a hand on the broken man, "Get up Jairus. Do not be afraid. Just believe and she will be saved." It seems pointless and hopeless, but Jairus obeys.

At the house, the professional mourners have gathered. In case the person is not really dead, they are paid to wake the patient with their wailing and loud instruments. But there's no response. Just a flat line. The girl's face is pale as ivory. Her lifeless form looks doll-like laid out on the bed. "Stop your noisemaking," Jesus shouts as he enters the house, "she is not dead, just asleep." A roar of mocking laughter replaces the wailing. They're professionals at this. They know death when they see it. Jesus manages to push them out the door and permits only the parents and three of his disciples to stay. Turning to the girl, the Rabbi does an amazing thing: he takes her hand. If touching a hemorrhaging woman makes you unclean, according to the Law of Moses, touching a dead body is strictly forbidden. But there are no barriers with God. Holding the limp hand, Jesus cries out, "Talitha cumi - Little girl, rise!" With that, the girl swallows a breath, her flesh warms, her eyes flutter and open, and she sits up. "Mommy, I'm hungry" Her parents laugh and cry and thank Jesus.

Interruptions. The woman's life was put on permanent, terminal hold. Jairus' family life was abruptly ruptured by sudden death. Both came to Jesus begging to be healed along with a thousand other cries for help. None of us likes to be interrupted, to have our "To Do" list cast aside by someone else's agenda. To have our neatly ordered lives torn up by a sudden crisis.

Yet life is a series of interruptions. They happen. They will happen. You can stamp your feet, have a blow up or a meltdown. Or you can do what the woman in the crowd and Jairus did and turn to God. For God is in the interruption. Some of them he inserts into our lives. But most of them just happen. In both cases, though, He is always there with us in the interruption. He is never annoyed by an interruption. He is the calm center, the eye of the storm. And He uses these interruptions to teach us, to stretch us, to help us reach and grow. For it seems we always wait until everything we plan has been cast to the wind, before we turn to Him. When, like the bleeding lady, we try every other option, we are ready finally to turn to him. And the message He gives us is the same He gave to these two interrupted lives: believe and you will be saved.

Why should you trust God with your interruption? Jesus is the Lord of Interruptions. Jairus was the ruler of a synagogue. Jesus was the ruler of heaven and earth. But all that was interrupted when he descended to earth from heaven. The woman had a flow of blood. But Jesus' life was interrupted when His blood flowed on the cross. And when Jesus, like the little girl, rose from the dead, the most fearful, powerful interruption of all, death, was interrupted forever.

Why should you trust Him with your interruption? Because He promises to be with you in the interruption, He promises to help you with your interruption and He promises an eternity without interruption.

Bob Prentice's sermon was interrupted. Three months into his first church, he was preaching on Sunday morning when the doors of the church suddenly swished open and the little town's only mail carrier bolted breathlessly down the aisle. Before the mailman was halfway to the pulpit he shouted, "Doc says if you wanna see your wife alive, you better come now!" An elder took the service while the pastor ran three blocks to the tiny hospital above the drugstore where Doris was in labor for their first child. At the top of the stairs Bob heard the nurse say, "Well, I think we've lost this one." But the doctor replied, "I'm not so sure. We're here and the congregation is probably praying." The baby refused to budge and a tired, fluttering heart showed signs of giving up. Doris had no strength to push down and she lay there pale and lifeless. Bob knelt beside his wife and started to give God a hard time. He asked the doctor and nurse to pray with him. One verse in the nurses' prayer seized him, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee."

"I didn't know where it came from," Bob recalled, "but it sounded holy and I clung to it. Soon after, I ceased asking God, 'Why?' and just thanked him over and over that it would be as He promised. I was like a drowning man who found a life preserver, and I hung on to it with all my strength." Doris neither moved nor flinched. It seemed so futile.

Back at church, the congregation was praying for Doris, the baby, and Bob. "Her heart is beating a little faster," the doctor announced. Soon her eyelids fluttered, then opened. Bob bent over her and repeated again and again the verse, "I will never leave thee nor forsake thee." Doris

mouthered the words. Her abdomen began a series of ripples, then a surge of energy focused on a baby searching for light and life.

At noon, a breathless mail carrier burst into the church. On seeing heads bowed in prayer, he removed his cap and triumphantly exclaimed, "You don't need to pray no more; she got borned alright." The nurse wrapped the baby girl in swaddling clothes and laid her in her father's arms. Mother went to sleep. The doctor sang the Doxology. "Praise God from whom all blessings flow."

Is your life interrupted? You know where to go.