

Life Disrupted

Pastor Paul Dinges

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Sermon Audio file

Scripture Text: Luke 1:5-15, 24-45

In the video we've just watched, we see two women and a man whose lives have had quite a turn. The term "disrupted" definitely fits the life they are facing. No one would have expected these events to unfold this way. Maybe you can relate? Have you ever run headlong into an unseen, powerful disruption in your life? You probably have. If you haven't, well ... just wait. And while you're waiting, let's look back at how this all started.

"In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, 'Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.'" (Luke 1:26-28)

This all sounds so sweet and exciting until we understand that this young (likely teenage) girl, who is engaged to be married, now has some explaining to do. With her parents. With her betrothed. With, well, everybody she knows and loves. It's here that Mary enters a "Life Disrupted."

And it all begins with untimely timing. You likely know at least some of Mary's story. But what about this couple, Zechariah and Elizabeth? Elizabeth, who in the above passage is in her sixth month of pregnancy? Let's go back a few verses and see how we got here:

"When Herod was king of Judea, there was a priest by the name of Zechariah from the priestly group of Abijah. His wife Elizabeth was from the family of Aaron. Both were good people and pleased the Lord God by obeying all that he had commanded. But they did not have children. Elizabeth could not have any, and both Zechariah and Elizabeth were already old." (Luke 1:5-7)

Luke describes an older couple beyond child-bearing age. He describes them as "good people" living a life of faith. We learn Zechariah was a priest...a man of God. Yet, something was missing. In a culture that placed value on a couple having children, they had none. They were facing the daunting challenge of unmet expectations. We've all confronted unmet expectations to some degree or another in our lives, haven't we? But I believe very few can compare with the particularly difficult unmet expectations of a couple, like Elizabeth and Zechariah, wanting to conceive and birth a child.

Then we read the following: "All at once, an angel from the Lord appeared to Zechariah at the right side of the altar. Zechariah was confused and afraid when he saw the angel. But the angel told him: Don't be afraid, Zechariah! God has heard your prayers. Your wife Elizabeth will have a son, and you must name him John." (Luke 1:11-13)

The angel's encounter with Elizabeth and Zechariah reminds us that God's timing is always perfect, even when it seems untimely. Just as Elizabeth (who was thought to be beyond her childbearing years) conceives a child in her old age, we can trust God in the good times as well as the untimely, challenging events of our

lives. There will be surprises along life's way. There will be blessings beyond our imagination.

There also will be struggles that may bring us to our knees. Yet we have this promise from God's word: "So do not fear, for I am with you; do not be dismayed, for I am your God. I will strengthen you and help you; I will uphold you with my righteous right hand." (Isaiah 41:10)

I can imagine Zechariah (the well-schooled priest) quoting this verse from Isaiah to a shocked Elizabeth as she realizes she will be giving birth in what we understand to be her twilight years. "How can this be?" she may have asked (possibly screamed?). Yet, God was working in her life and, simultaneously, preparing her to be a significant voice in the ear of a young, likely worried, teenage girl.

The words, "do not fear, for I am with you," would have been appropriate for her and Zechariah. If you are experiencing an "untimely time" today, please hear this: God is for you. God is with you. Amid life's disruptions, place your trust in God.

Secondly, we see an unexpected encouragement. Let's return to Mary's story. She's been informed by the angel that she, a virgin, will conceive a son who is to be called Jesus. Also, that her much older relative, Elizabeth, will give birth. Luke continues in verses 39-45 of chapter one.

"At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!'" (Luke 1:39-45)

Mary and Elizabeth's joyful greeting reminds us of the power of community and encouragement. Elizabeth's exclamation of "Blessed are you..." may have been the first positive words Mary had heard in days or even weeks. In a world (not unlike ours) often obsessed with judging others, their relationship shows us the strength that comes from supporting and uplifting one another. But even more so, it shows us the strength that comes in trusting God's word.

Again, reading from Isaiah, we have these words concerning God: "He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak. Even youths grow tired and weary, and young men stumble and fall; but those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength. They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run and not grow weary; they will walk and not be faint." (Isaiah 40:29-31)

Zechariah could have turned to this passage to encourage Elizabeth, Mary, or both. We'll never know for sure. But what is evident is this: During this season, as we exchange gifts and share time with our loved ones, may we recall the importance of being a source of encouragement in each other's lives. And may we not overlook the words from Isaiah: In our weakness, God is our strength. Whether young or old, may we run and not grow weary; may we walk and not be faint; as we follow where God leads.

In our ever-disrupted lives, may we pause this Christmas season to embrace the untimely timing that life brings our way. May we look for opportunities to be that source of unexpected encouragement among those we encounter. And in all the trappings that so often cloud the reason for this season, may we not miss the unmatched miracle that unfolded in the lives of those two babies born six months apart all those years ago.

One, a voice crying in the wilderness, "Prepare the way." The other, the one for whom the way was prepared. We read this from the gospel of the apostle John: "Some Pharisees had been sent to John (the

Baptist). They asked him, 'Why are you baptizing people, if you are not the Messiah or Elijah or the Prophet?' John told them, 'I use water to baptize people. But here with you is someone you don't know.' (John 1:24-26) The next day, John saw Jesus coming toward him and said: 'Here is the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!'" (John 1:29)

The unmatched miracle is this: "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16) Jesus, "The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world." Do you know him? If not, please know this: Even in the middle of life's disruptions, as the video told us earlier, "There is JOY in saying YES to God!"

This Advent season let's reflect on how God will cause our lives to be disrupted as we are called to serve God and advance His kingdom work here on earth. The question is how will we respond when our life is disrupted by God? Prayerfully, we will respond in a similar manner as Mary and Elizabeth, by making the most of untimely timing, by graciously receiving unexpected encouragement from others, and by celebrating the unmatched miracle God has for us in the birth of Jesus Christ.