

I. In the 2006 movie comedy, *Talladega Nights*, Will Ferrell plays a stock car driver, Ricky Bobby. Ricky is a family man. He says grace at a family meal, “Dear tiny Jesus.” “Jesus did grow up,” his wife reminds him. “I like the Christmas Jesus best,” he insists. And he continues his prayer, “Dear 8 lb., 6 oz., newborn infant Jesus ... in your golden fleece diapers, waving your tiny, fat, balled-up fist ... We thank you for all your power and grace. Amen.”

II. Columnist Jim Coyle went to a boy’s birthday party, where he caught sight of a toy amid the collection of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers. There in a plastic package, backed by a picture of the Holy Land, stood “**Action Figure Jesus**,” looking pretty much as we saw him in Sunday school, flowing hair, long white robe, sandals, arms slightly akimbo, palms up.

III. In winter of 1914, along the Western Front five months after the outbreak of WWI, German and British troops spontaneously sang Christmas carols to each other across the lines. At certain points the British soldiers could hear German brass bands joining the chorus. At the first light of dawn on Christmas Day, some German soldiers emerged from the trenches and approached the Allied lines, calling out “Merry Christmas” in English. Seeing that the Germans were unarmed, American troops climbed out of their trenches and shook hands with the enemy soldiers. There was even a documented case of soldiers from opposing sides playing a good-natured game of soccer.

In a matter of hours, we will take joy in celebrating the birth of a child who is the Light of the World.

But for most people, God’s with-ness in the world is an interruption, a Divine Disruption amid the commercialization of the season. It certainly was a Divine Disruption for Mary. We tend to romanticize the encounter between the angel Gabriel and the young maiden, Mary. I would like us to take a more realistic look at what God is inviting Mary to be and do, because I think it helps us understand how God invites us.

If we were to retell this the way Jesus told stories, we might better see ourselves, even as we see ourselves in Jesus’ parables. There was a ruler who had immense lands, as far as the eye could see. But he was unmarried and childless. There would be no one to inherit this vast kingdom. So the king sent a messenger to scour the countryside in search of a suitable bride. It did not matter to the king whether the bride was rich or poor, from highest or lowest society. It did not matter her age or her appearance. She had to be someone of moral virtue, with a calm disposition and a brave heart. After searching the whole kingdom over, the messenger found a maiden in a remote village, the daughter of peasants. She was virtuous, calm, and happy in her simple life. Sure that the king would find favor with this bride, the messenger thought. First I must test her heart. “Greetings, favored one!” The maiden shrank back, startled at the disruption to her spinning. “Do not be afraid. “You are the one the king has chosen to give birth to his son, the heir to the throne.” The maiden hesitated. “But I am not of royal blood.”

“Nothing is impossible if the king desires it,”
was the confident reply.

“You will give birth
and you will raise the child as your own,
here in this village.

Nevertheless he will be the king’s son,
heir to the throne.”

She pondered the invitation carefully.

“I am ready to serve my lord.

Let it be as you have spoken.”

As Jesus would say,

Let those with ears to hear, hear.

Stripping the story of its supernatural qualities
reveals the messiness of its human context.

Take out the mystical elements,
and you recognize the risk Mary faces.

Unlike the divine plan for creation,
the human context seems to us to be incoherent,
unpredictable, fragile, and adrift.

So we empathize with Mary:

Would I – could I – disrupt my orderly world
to answer God’s call?

Behind the angelic visitation

and perfect-faith response,

lies a human situation that,

for its sheer improbability, has the ring of truth.

Mary’s hesitation is understandable.

That Mary is given a voice at all in this passage
is remarkable.

First of all, as a woman, Mary is little more
than her father’s property until she marries,
at which point she becomes her husband’s.

No longer a daughter, not yet a wife,

Mary is offered the likelihood
of birthing God’s child.

Preacher Barbara Brown Taylor talks Mary through
this bad news / good news invitation:

“Simply drop your eyes and refuse to look up

until you know the angel has left the room
and you are alone again.

Then smooth your hair and go back
to your spinning or your reading
or whatever it is that is most familiar to you
and pretend that nothing has happened.

“Or – agree to **smuggle** God into the world
inside your own body.”

Mary chooses the Divine Disruption.

She is about to become an embarrassment
to her own family

and a disruption to her community as well.

Whatever constancy she has known
is about to be upset, forever.

Jesus’ birth is only the first of many disruptions.

Gabriel selects this particular woman
in this particular time and place? Why?

I find some clues in three little prepositions.

Gabriel approaches Mary exclaiming (v. 28),

“Rejoice, O blessed One! The Lord is with you.”

In what sense is God **with** Mary?

The Greek preposition here is *meta*, as in metabolic.

Meta conveys the idea of being alongside:

God’s physical presence is alongside Mary
at that moment.

In verse 30, the word “with” occurs again,
but in a little different context:

“You have found favor **with** God.”

The preposition here is *para*, meaning

“in God’s opinion” of Mary.

Then describing how she will conceive God’s child,
verse 35, our translation says,

“The Holy Spirit will come **upon** you.”

This preposition is *epi*, as in episode.

A Greek-speaking audience would hear in *epi*
a whole range of meanings,

starting with “on top of” or “above.”

It also means nearby, toward, in the direction of.

Epi can indicate time:

“The Holy Spirit will come in your time.”

The word *para* appears again in v 37:

“For nothing will be impossible with God.”

This time, *para* means “as long as there is,” as in the statement,

“Sticking to a diet during the holidays is tough, as long as there is food around.”

Putting the phrases together, the full meaning of Gabriel’s words would be:

“The Lord is right here beside you.

“In the opinion of God, you are blessed.

“The Holy Spirit will come toward you.

“Nothing will be impossible as long as God is around.”

Gabriel is reassuring Mary that she need not fear failure, even with so ambitious an assignment.

There is no situation that God cannot bless.

God chooses Mary, not because of anything she is or has done, but purely out of God’s grace.

And God will stay with Mary.

This provides Mary sufficient assurance that she can reply to Gabriel,

“Let it be according to your word.”

Let me be the mother of Immanuel, God With Us.

The way Luke tells it,

Mary sets a pretty high standard for accepting God’s gift on God’s terms, faithfully and graciously.

Any one of us might ask for an attorney before accepting a disruption like Mary’s.

“Is this an arm’s length transaction?

“God, look at this from my viewpoint.

Are we really working as equals here?”

We might seek an indemnification clause.

“If this turns out to be a joke, God, who’s going to repair my reputation?”

“And, while we’re on the subject,

“Who is responsible if this child turns out to be different than you’ve promised?”

Isn’t that how we react to major disruptions?

Put them off? – cover our losses? – get something in return?

King David, in contemplating the proper place for the Ark of the Covenant, assumes the lead.

He summons his soothsayer, Nathan:

“Tell God I’ll build a temple.”

But it doesn’t work that way. God leads.

David, like Mary, learns to accept

that God knows best.

You and me? We would bargain, negotiate.

We would explore all the “what ifs”.

Life can hand us some pretty big disruptions:

As when we’re the sole surviving child,

and we have to make decisions

about the care of an aging parent ...

Or when a nor’easter batters the eaves

and soaks the walls of our house ...

Or when the nominating committee asks

if we’ll serve for 3 years on session.

When life is disrupted, divinely or otherwise,

we may be stopped in our tracks, speechless.

It’s no use tossing the problem upstairs:

“God, you got me into this.

How are you going to get me out?”

Perhaps it’s some relief to think that God has had this turn of events planned all along.

The way God created this world, stuff happens.

It’s not pretty. It’s not fair. It disrupts our lives.

But we’re in good company.

The Bible tells many stories of God

yanking people out of their comfort zones.

Even someone as put-upon as Job

remains faithful to God his divine disrupter:

“As long as my breath is in me

and the spirit of God is in my nostrils,

my lips will not speak falsehood,
 and my tongue will not utter deceit.” (*Job 27*)
 Mary’s response is Job-like:
 Her Yes to God is unequivocal. No doubt at all.
 It’s the most flattering portrait
 of any woman in the Bible.
 In this moment, Mary is the first human being
 to receive the Gospel of Jesus the Christ.
 Mary asks for nothing in return,
 no signs or guarantees.
 She accepts God’s promise as a gift,
 graciously, courageously.
 One theologian marvels,
 “Mary opens her womb to God –
 the deepest place where life is born.”
 God is birthing new life in, with,
 and upon each of us, at this very moment.
 We give birth to Immanuel each Christmas season.
 God entrusts the bearing of Immanuel to us,
 the ordinary people of the church,
 unprepared as we are, in our place and time.
 We are asked to smuggle Christ into the world –
 a hurting and hurtful world.
 The incarnation means that God believes in us.
 That God seeks us out.
 And finds us, right here.
 God surprises us with the unexpected.
 God is with us in the ugly parts of our lives
 as well as the beautiful.
 The incarnation means that God values
 our workaday lives enough
 to disrupt them with divine blessing.
 God disrupts us where we live,
 in gritty human life
 with all its violence and beauty,
 corruption and nobility, twists and turns.
 God entrusts the most important message
 of all time to the least equipped,
 you and me, the church.

The church is the womb
 in which God is reborn every Christmas.
 The seminary president Joel Green once said:
 “The good news is that God’s redemptive activity
 disrupts the very structures of the world
 that support and perpetuate
 a social order of privilege and power.”
 As another Advent season comes to a close,
 the Annunciation to Mary challenges us:
 Will we accept this child, however disruptive,
 however untimely, however embarrassing?
 Will we pledge obedience,
 not to an omnipotent ruler on a throne of judgment,
 but to an infant waving his chubby fist at the air.
 Will we live with Jesus as a dynamic influence,
 not a pose-able action figure?
 Will we cease hostilities long enough
 to allow our essential humanity to prevail?
 Let us welcome this Divine Disruption.
 Amen.