

Second Sunday after Pentecost
Reformation, Media
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Interruptions – how many of you have experienced interruptions in your life or in your job? Just about all of us. How many of you like interruptions? Not as many. I experience quite a bit of interruption in ministry. In fact one of my seminary professors, or perhaps it was a colleague once told me that most of ministry happens in the interruptions. Well, I don't know if that is totally accurate, but a lot of ministry happens in the interruptions that occur.

There are all kind of interruptions – the oil spill has brought about an interruption in oil drilling and pumping as well as in the gulf coasts fishing industry. Floods, tornadoes, and earthquakes bring about interruptions in community priorities and hundreds or thousands of lives. But the kinds of interruptions I want to focus on today are personal interruptions of some significance.

On May 29,2003 I had an interruption in my life that I could not ignore – a heart attack. Right now, Duncan Stearns is going through an interruption in his life as he has an esophagial tumor assessed and prepares for surgery. Some of you have had the unpleasant experience of having your job interrupted – a position eliminated or a general lay-off and suddenly you're wondering what you'll do next. I guess you could say that's what happened to St. Paul.

Of course this was all before he was SAINT Paul. He was Saul – a Pharisaic Jew from Tarsus and he was rapidly climbing up the corporate ladder – a real up and comer. Paul bought into a life designed for success. He was a Torah-obedient, highly educated, politically correct, powerful and influential Pharisaic Jew who was also a Roman citizen. Paul studied hard. Then he put his scholarship into practice. He preached to popularize the revitalization of the Torah way of life Pharisees were proclaiming to the first century Jewish people. Paul could claim he was a “Pharisee among Pharisees.” Paul could claim to be “blameless under the Law.” He had worked incredibly hard. He had paid a big price, in time and perseverance, in commitment and conviction. Paul freely admits in today's Galatians' text that he wanted nothing so much as to “destroy” or ‘annihilate” all those who confessed Christ as their Savior. This was a life he enjoyed and it promised to give him everything he had ever wanted.

Until it was suddenly interrupted. Until that moment on the Damascus Road when it was revealed to him that the direction he was going was not the right direction. Until that moment on the Damascus Road, when the rug was pulled out from underneath him and made him question everything he had believed in and worked to achieve. In this instance, it was God who derailed the locomotive of Saul's ambition in order to put him on the right track of life. And, while Saul initially viewed this as an unexpected and unwelcome interruption, God meant it to be a time of interruption and instruction.

Saul took some time off – went to Arabia to try to sort things out. Later he returned to Damascus – and took three years – three years. This was not an instant change of occupation. He had to figure out what this all meant for him, but it was clear, after three

years, that God had something else in mind for him. The path he had been on, which he was convinced was a God-approved path, was in fact a mis-guided, incorrect path that was thwarting God's effort. He had to change. HE had to change. It began with a change of name, from Saul to Paul, but it really signified a change of heart and mind and life. He would work just as hard, maybe harder. He would suffer more. But this interruption in his life put him on a path that gave him renewed purpose, great satisfaction and the absolute assurance that it was what God intended for him.

Sometimes God creates interruptions to bring you back to God purpose for your life. Sometimes God CREATES interruptions to stop you from continuing on a destructive path in life and to instruct you – to re-route you in a direction that will be one of health and fulfillment and purpose, even though it may require as much or more energy and be as hard or harder than the destructive path you were on.

But there is more. For not all interruptions are created by God. Nelson Mandella was a young man convinced that the apartheid system that separated races and used the law of the land to create different rights for different groups of people was an unjust system. Like Paul, he was zealous in his efforts and joined the ANC. In 1947 at the age of 29 he was elected to the Executive committee of the Transvaal ANC and began his work in earnest. Like Paul, he advanced within his chosen life's purpose, becoming a lawyer, rising to new leadership positions within the ANC – but a marked man within the South African apartheid system. Then, in 1964, at age 46 life was interrupted. This time the interruption was not caused by God, but was caused by those forces that oppose God's purpose in the world.

Make no mistake about it, the forces that oppose God's purposes in the world are powerful, and for Mandela and his companions, the legal system of the controlling powers of South Africa gave him a life sentence and sent them to Robbings Island. I can't even imagine all that he had to endure, and his ability to stay positive about his purpose and focused on his cause, but God not only gave him strength for 27 years of imprisonment, but used those years to increase his wisdom and to change the minds and attitudes of many of his jailers.

But that should not surprise us, for when all the forces that oppose God's purposes in this world interrupted Jesus' ministry; and imprisoned, beat and finally killed God's only Son; it was in the end, only an opportunity for God to instruct the world that while you may try to interrupt God's purposes, nothing in all creation, not even death can stop God from accomplishing what God intends. Surely that faith was part of what helped to sustain Nelson Mandela, for as he came out of prison, he spent his first night at the residence of Archbishop Tutu, acknowledging that Tutu had inspired the entire nation with his words and his courage, reviving people's hope in the darkest times with his reminders of God's faithfulness to those who are oppressed.

In each case, the key was understanding the nature of God's purpose for the world as revealed in Jesus – who with his own life and ministry preached not hate against any group, but inclusive love; not vengeance, but forgiving love; not rejection, but accepting love; not self-serving but a servant's love. So Saul, who in Acts 9 is portrayed as “breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord,” has his life interrupted and becomes Paul who proclaims to the Galatians “there is no longer Jew or Greek, slave

or free, male and female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus.” And Mandela can fulfill his purpose of uniting South Africa and dismantling the apartheid system.

God can create interruptions and disruptions in our lives to bring us back to God's purposes, and when those who oppose God try to thwart and interrupt the God's plans, God will prevail and can even use the efforts of his foes to reveal God's power in your life.

In my Christmas letter of 2003, the year of my heart attack interruption, I wrote this:

The sudden changes and chances of life were all too evident this year, but it was also a reminder for me and Matt of how important community is in our lives. Family, friends, and the church family were all there for us throughout the year, with prayers, support and encouragement. . . and the principle link for most of us is our Lord Jesus, whose constant presence and unending strength are at the foundation of our lives.

As we pause once again to celebrate the birth of Jesus, it seems so appropriate to renew this bond and rejoice in the oneness we share in Christ. How marvelous is our God, who through one human infant could bring together people of every race and nation, so that efforts to help those in Africa rise out of the same love as the efforts to help me in my recovery and to encourage Matthew in his journey. This is a great God that we worship, and so first honoring God, we also give thanks for all of you and wish you a most joyous Christmas and every blessing for health and happiness in the coming year.

This is a great God – how is he at work in the interruptions in your life?

Amen.