

Interrupted: Luke 1:26-38; 47-55

Whether Mary was reading or spinning or planning her wedding, the annunciation came as an interruption.

by [Lauren F. Winner](#) in the [December 16, 2008](#) issue

The annunciation has attracted the attention of commentators for centuries. Medieval writers liked to embroider upon Luke's bare-bones account, saying, for example, that when the angel Gabriel appeared, Mary was reading Isaiah 7, the prophet's foretelling of the birth of Christ. Visual artists were also attracted to the scene. Many paintings show Mary interrupted not from reading but from spinning, and legend has it that she was spinning Jesus' shroud: somehow, intuitively, she knew to prepare for his death before she even knew about his birth.

For me, the annunciation is one of the most challenging passages of scripture—not because I don't know exactly how to think about angels (I don't) or the virgin birth (ditto), but because the passage seems to suggest that to live the life of faith we must let God interrupt us. Whether Mary was reading or spinning or planning her wedding, the annunciation came as an interruption in a life that had been proceeding according to plan.

Mary's interruption, significantly, was a child—and *child*, of course, is synonymous with *interruption*. (I marvel at our culture's trend of trying to time pregnancies so that they don't radically interrupt our routines. My friend Louise was determined to give birth in a two-week window between semesters, and she hit it spot on. But, children being who they are, birth would be the last thing she could plan so precisely for the next 18 years.) These good tidings Gabriel brings are tidings of a lifetime of interruptions.

Mary responds to the news of this interruption with a line that is repeated in the church as a prayer, a prayer known by its Latin name, the *Fiat mihi*: "Let it be to me according to your will." Because of this response—which happens to be the first of

five prayers that Luke scattered through the opening two chapters of his Gospel—many people have taken Mary to be a model of the Christian life. She was someone who heard God’s word and submitted to it. She noticed that she was being interrupted, she recognized that the interruption came from God, and she embraced it.

I have often wondered what I would have said in Mary’s shoes. Would I have said “Fiat mihi”? I doubt it. I think I would probably say, “Excuse me?” or “Um, thank you, but I’d really rather not.” The fact is, I’m not especially interested in being interrupted by God. God’s plans seem rarely to coincide with my own (and as an off-the-charts J on the Myers-Briggs, I have a lot of very carefully worked-out plans).

Actually, I’m better at grand, earthquake interruptions—dramatic interruptions that require moving, changing jobs, radically redirecting life plans—than I am at smaller, more quotidian interruptions. It’s the smaller interruptions—say, the knock of an unannounced visitor on my office door—that really irk me. When I hear that unexpected knock, I turn my face into a smile and try not to communicate to my visitors that I was in the middle of a really crucial sentence and would they please leave and close the door behind them? It was easier for me to take a year’s leave of absence from graduate school to move to Virginia and help care for my dying mother than it is to cope with an unexpected visitor who interrupts my perfectly planned afternoon.

This is where I’m supposed to tell you a story about the day a tearful student came to my door, and because I resisted the temptation to tell her to get lost, because I was willing to be interrupted, we had a profound encounter that changed both our lives for the better, forever. Did I mention that the student’s name was Gabriella?

That’s actually happened a few times. But more consistently, interruptions lead to something a bit less dramatic. They lead to uncomfortable glimmers of self-awareness; they show me to be a prideful control freak who dares to think that whatever I’ve got on tap for the day is supremely important and who dares to think that I own my own precious time. They are interruptions that, when I let them, foster a little humility. And it is that hard-to-swallow fruit of humility that allows me to sometimes recognize these interruptions as God’s way of gradually schooling me in the grand imperatives of letting go of all I cling to and following Christ.

The lectionary also gives us the choice of reading the Magnificat (the second of five prayers found in the opening chapters of Luke). In the Magnificat, Mary praises God for another kind of interruption. She proclaims that God's bringing about new life in us is intimately, inseparably linked to God's disestablishing the proud and establishing *himself*. God lifts up the humble and knocks down the powerful; God fills up the hungry and sends away the rich, empty. The Magnificat is a prayer about God's revolution interrupting not only our tidy, ordered lives but our whole social order. It is a prayer that allows us to see the way that God's reversals and interruptions are already at work in the world and invites us to participate in them.

When we speak of the source of our salvation, we usually say something like "the cross" or "Jesus Christ." Perhaps, this week, we may name the means of our salvation slightly differently: we are saved by Mary's willingness to be interrupted. And the next time someone wishes us a Merry Christmas, perhaps we can hear in that wish a question: Are you, like Mary, willing to be interrupted by God?