

When God is Interrupted
Mark 6:30-34, 53-56
August 1, 2021

This summer marks the return of the vacation for many! People are taking to the highways and airways in record numbers not seen since before the pandemic. They are making up for the lost summer of 2020. Families are getting together again after more than a year in some cases. People are ready to get out and get away.

Our own family is gathering for a reunion of sorts in the Sierras in August to pay respects to my brother-in-law whose memorial was delayed since last January. I know a number of you have been traveling or have plans this summer. We all need a break – a chance to get away, kick back and do whatever you do that helps you relax and feel renewed.

Jesus and the disciples needed a break in today's gospel lesson – but it didn't happen. Their plans were interrupted. The disciples were worn out and exhausted. Just look at what has already happened in chapter 6 of Mark: Jesus sent the disciples out on a mission to share the Good News. Their beloved John the Baptist was beheaded, and Jesus and the disciples fed the 5000. They were exhausted!

Following Jesus demanded more than they bargained for. So Jesus said to the disciples,

6:31 Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while. For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

6:54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

6:55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was. (Mark 6:31-34, 53-55)

The Son of God was interrupted . . . many times. His plans and ministry had to be put aside in order to respond to the unexpected, urgent needs of people everyday. Today's incident is just one of many similar incidents in the life and ministry of Jesus. Let's take a look.

Jesus responded to the crowds with compassion and not impatience. Call it compassion fatigue. If the covid pandemic taught us anything, it was that our front line healthcare workers worked tirelessly, often burned out in the process, yet they found a way to go on. Jesus and the disciples found a way to go on. Even their desire for respite and retreat was interrupted.

There is an important lesson to be learned here: God turns interruptions into opportunities for blessings and grace. We might be frustrated, impatient and short

with people in a similar situation. But Jesus responded with mercy, compassion and patience, and in today's world, his example might just be one of the most important lessons we can learn.

In today's reading, Jesus is stressing to his disciples the importance of rest and taking care of themselves . . . the importance of spending time alone, away from daily demands . . . and the need for time alone with God. But then the unexpected happens: Jesus and the disciples are discovered by the crowd at their lake-side retreat center. Instead of a well-deserved break, they are facing a new crisis.

The word was out about Jesus, and people walked ten miles around the northern end of the lake to reach the spot where Jesus and the disciples would land. They were hungry, hurting and desperate. Many of them would have been in the crowd when Jesus feed the multitudes. So the plans Jesus had for a retreat, a rest and a time of prayer would have to wait. Their plans are interrupted. Sometimes even God's plans are interrupted. When that happens to us, we can take the opportunity to draw closer to God and God's own son.

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Have your vacation plans ever been interrupted? Many plans were interrupted during the last year because of covid. Many stayed home. Vacations and trips were cancelled or put on hold. But nothing . . . nothing could top what Jesus and the disciples faced in today's gospel lesson.

Jesus is just getting back together with the disciples who have been out ministering in his name. He wanted them to be refreshed and renewed in their own faith and ministry. But the multitudes had other idea. Someone knew where to find Jesus. And so after discovering where Jesus was headed, the people walked ten miles around the northern end of the lake just to reach the spot where Jesus and the disciples would be.

They pressed in around him. The people were desperate. They were in need of what only Jesus could give . . . a word of grace . . . a word of healing and hope . . . forgiveness or encouragement, and Jesus responded. While some might have responded to these pressing needs with frustration or even anger, Jesus responded with compassion and empathy. His response was to minister . . . to heal and to teach. He met their needs with mercy and compassion.

God cares when *our* lives are interrupted. God has compassion for us, just like Jesus had for the multitudes. In fact, sometimes it is in the detours and interruptions where Jesus is most present -- With the lost job . . . the missed opportunity . . . an untimely death of a loved one . . . a difficult diagnosis . . . covid cases skyrocketing . . . a devastating divorce . . . or emotional turmoil.

We have had a number of losses and devastating health issues in our own congregation over the last six months. Throughout the unexpected events of a lifetime, the disappointments and heartaches mount up. But in spite of these things, if we take time to seek God with all of our heart and mind, we discover that, far from being absent, God is right in the midst of the struggles we encounter, and has been right there with us all along, especially in the details and detours of everyday life.

“Life is what happens while you’re making other plans,” John Lennon once said. Thank goodness, God is never too busy to notice, and doesn’t mind if we interrupt. Jesus had other plans, as you saw in the story this morning. Once in a while we catch a glimpse of God’s plan when our lives are disrupted or take a detour – especially when the unexpected happens, God seems to be most evident.

Sometimes God even interrupts our lives to steer us in the right direction if we are paying attention. Here is one such interruption and detour in my life years ago. In 1985, I was in the midst of interviewing for a church in northern Indiana. On the night before I was to preach in a neutral pulpit, I received a phone call from a church in West Virginia, about an hour from where my parents lived. They asked if I would consider being their pastor, that we had a mutual friend that had recommended me to their search committee.

Without knowing why at the time, the invitation was compelling, and there was something urging me to find out more. I pursued this mysterious lead. To make a long story short, I ended up changing direction and accepting the position in northeastern WV. It just felt right, and I didn’t even know why. It was a gut feeling. Within six months, my father developed pancreatic and liver cancer, and was given only a short while to live. Serving the church closer to home, we made the most of that time. He died two years later. It would have been impossible to spend quality time or participate in his care had I taken the church in Indiana.

What at the time seemed like a detour ended up being a blessing. As the French mathematician Blaise Pascal once said, “the heart has it’s own reasons, which reason alone cannot comprehend.” Sometimes God interrupts our plans and redirects our course. It happened to Jesus and the disciples, and he’s willing to be there for us. He is willing to take time away from his ministry in order to listen and care for us. You could say that *is* his ministry, and we are his mission. Jesus does not mind being interrupted when we have a need.

Interruptions or opportunities? It all depends on how you look at it. Jesus had a different perspective.

Instead of being annoyed, he anointed others. He continues to come to us today by taking our detours, and turning them into divine destinations. After all, people interrupted him. His own life was interrupted and cut short on the cross. He wants to tell us that it's okay to interrupt his plans if something urgent or unexpected comes up that will not wait. There will never find a "Do Not Disturb" sign on God's door, and you'll never see a "No Vacancy" sign on God's house.

Most of us don't like interruptions, but they can be opportunities to discover God's plan for our lives. The word "crisis" in the Greek New Testament means, "opportunity." With God, it is always about providing opportunities to draw closer to God, and discovering what really matters in our lives. No matter is too large or too small that you cannot go directly to the Lord of the Universe and share your heart. The time is always right. Maybe interruptions are really opportunities in disguise.

Speaking of detours and interruptions, you might recall that not long after Jesus was born, Joseph was warned in a dream to flee the wrath of Herod, and to take a different road out of town on their way to Egypt. (Matthew 2:13)

Sometimes I think it's the detours and disruptions that are a paradigm for our lives. God encourages us to find time every day to pray and be renewed in the Spirit. It helps keep the lines of communication open. But there will be interruptions and delays and unexpected events around the next curve that you cannot see. It is during those times I hope you will take time to notice if something else might be at work . . . something you were not expecting. Perhaps God has a message for you.

There are many roads that lead to blessings . . . even if it's not the road you expected to be on. It is part of every traveler's journey, and every pilgrim's promise. Amen

Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

6:30 The apostles gathered around Jesus, and told him all that they had done and taught.

6:31 He said to them, "Come away to a deserted place all by yourselves and rest a while." For many were coming and going, and they had no leisure even to eat.

6:32 And they went away in the boat to a deserted place by themselves.

6:33 Now many saw them going and recognized them, and they hurried there on foot from all the towns and arrived ahead of them.

6:34 As he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them, because they were like sheep without a shepherd; and he began to teach them many things.

6:53 When they had crossed over, they came to land at Gennesaret and moored the boat.

6:54 When they got out of the boat, people at once recognized him,

6:55 and rushed about that whole region and began to bring the sick on mats to wherever they heard he was.

6:56 And wherever he went, into villages or cities or farms, they laid the sick in the marketplaces, and begged him that they might touch even the fringe of his cloak; and all who touched it were healed.