

The Time is Now: Jesus Interrupted
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Mark 1:21-45

"I'm not going to pray about it," said my young friend, *"because I wouldn't want to pester God. It's not that important."* We were sharing the tiny and tremendous concerns that afflict high school youth: the stresses of keeping grades up and maintaining friend groups, worries about pets and parents and siblings and what our futures may hold. And I don't remember what it was that she decided not to pray about that day, but I do remember those words: *"I wouldn't want to pester God."*

Our youth pastor was taken aback. But we, the other youth group kids, nodded our heads in agreement, impressed with our friend's selflessness. We knew from experience that it was a bad idea to voice too many complaints to the adults in our lives. And if our parents and teachers were too busy to hear our constant stream of requests, then God must be even busier!

It was wise to make as few requests as possible, politely worded and carefully timed. *"Prayer must be like that"*, we thought. We didn't want God to think we were complainers or crybabies. Our poor in-over-her-head youth pastor tried to explain that prayer was not a scarce resource to be rationed out or hoarded, but that God was always listening.

Today's passage comes from the first chapter of Mark, a gospel so anxious to get to the meat of the Gospel that it skips the Christmas story entirely. No shepherds, no angels, no wise men. The narrative begins with Jesus already grown and launches straight into his baptism and his 40 day exile in the wilderness. From there, Jesus sets off on a preaching tour of Galilee, calls four disciples, heals a man with an unclean spirit, then Simon's mother-in-law, then a great crowd of sick people and demoniacs. To close the chapter, Jesus meets a leper who asks for healing.

There is a question about Jesus' response to the leper which hinges on one word of the original Greek text. Some of the ancient manuscripts (and therefore some translations), say that Jesus was moved with compassion. But other ancient manuscripts say Jesus became angry.

Most of our English translations choose to represent Jesus as compassionate, rather than angry. It's perfectly understandable why they made that choice; it feels a little scandalous to imagine that Jesus got angry at a leper asking for healing.

But at the same time, I really kind of dig the idea of an Angry Interrupted Jesus! To me, it sounds like a very human reaction, and I like the idea that once - just once - Jesus maybe had some unruly emotions. It helps me to believe that really may be some hope for us yet!

As Mark rushes through the Gospel story, he tells us that Jesus has set out with a mission: to preach the Good News to all of Galilee. Jesus is the man with a plan.... But that plan has been interrupted. Maybe Jesus thought to himself "*Come on, come on, I don't have all day. I have a sermon to write!*"

But perhaps there are other reasons for his anger than mere annoyance...

Remember what it meant in that day and age to be a leper. In a society without modern medicine, with no understanding of germs, viruses, or the immune system, with no way to understand the causes of diseases and no way to treat them, many illnesses were feared; and people suffering from these diseases were outcasts, excluded from society. For Jesus to even speak to this man, let alone touch him, breaks the rules of a social system that kept clean and unclean separate. And maybe that separation really ticked Jesus off.

Or maybe there's another reason. Perhaps Jesus was beginning to realize that his life was going to be shaped by the unrelenting needs of people all around him. For the rest of his ministry, people will be clamoring for his attention: crying from the roadside, grasping at his garment hem, lowering a sickbed through the roof, trying to get all the healing he can offer them. You can't blame them, they are people in need. But I imagine that living with constant, overwhelming requests for help would be exhausting for anyone, and Jesus had so much to do and so very little time to get it done.

So if Jesus were angry for a moment, it may have been, in part, at the realization that there would never again be *just* a quick walk around town, *just* a dinner with friends, *just* a moment to pray. He was going to have to live with continual interruption.

We live with continual interruptions too, don't we? There is always something coming up, something clamoring for our attention. And we struggle to respond: a stranger whose car needs a jumpstart when we're already late for a daughter's soccer game, a child who enters our home, filling our hearts with joy but upsetting the way we are accustomed to doing things, a church member weeping in the pews on Sunday morning because her parent was just diagnosed with cancer when we are already late to a meeting.

Angry Interrupted Jesus teaches us something about how to live with the uncertainty of changing schedules and shifting priorities. Because even though he might have become angry for a moment--he does not let that first emotional reaction control his compassionate response.

Sometimes we get drawn into believing that cultivating a life of faith means always having an appropriate emotion in our hearts: peaceful contemplation in worship when our minds are filled with worry; sympathy for someone in need when honestly we are preoccupied with our own concerns; excitement for a life change when truly we are a bit apprehensive.

When Jesus feels anger yet acts with compassion, he reminds us that sometimes a life of discipleship means our neighbor with action... despite our normal human emotions of fear, anger or annoyance.

Living a life of faith becomes all about responding to life's curveballs and surprises, even when it is hard or when it calls for great generosity. Thankfully, in that endeavor we are never alone.

"I wouldn't want to pester God," my young friend said all those years ago. Maybe we think that we are not important enough to notice, not worthy anyone's attention – much less God's. Maybe that is why we spend so much time trying to be more important, to be more productive, to convince ourselves and each other of our own value. But there is nothing we need to do to earn God's attention or love.

The promise in this story is that Christ is always ready to turn toward us. On that Galilee road, with so many limits and demands, with so many consequences for stretching out his hand, Jesus chooses to touch and heal because, to Jesus, each one of God's children matters. Each one is a beloved and beautiful child of God, each one is unique and precious.

And the challenge in this story is to go and do likewise;
to approach our interruptions and disruptions with grace,
to attend to the unexpected intrusions and inconvenient crises,
those times of uncertainty and change,
and consider them *moments of opportunity*.

The challenge is also to set aside everything we think we know about the
future,
and all of our ideas about who and what is important,
and turn toward strangers and neighbors to bless and heal.

Because when we do that, when we take a moment, take a breath, and turn
towards each other, we see Jesus, with us on the road.

May it be so, and may it be soon. The time is now. Amen.