

“When Life Doesn’t Go as You Planned”
Sermon Series on *The King and His Kingdom*
Rev. Dr. Peter B. Barnes
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(Mt. 1:18-25)

Introduction.

One of the favorite stories our children liked us to read to them at Christmas was *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*. Have you read it? It’s the story of a family named the Herdmans who were from the wrong side of the tracks and, as the book puts it, “had the worst kids in the history of the world.” One Sunday morning during Advent they decided to show up at church because they heard the church offered free food during Sunday school.

While attending Sunday school they learn that the church was going to do a Christmas pageant, so the kids decide to audition. The children were given parts despite the protest of some members of the church, and their unique interpretations of the Christmas story made for some colorful moments. For example, they thought the wise men were a bunch of dirty spies, and Herod needed a good spanking. Eventually chaos erupts during the pageant, and it throws everyone into a panic.

All of us can relate to a story of plans we made for Christmas and hopes we had for the holidays, but somehow everything went wrong and our hopes were dashed to pieces. You miss your flight, your boyfriend breaks up with you, the baby comes early, or the medical test comes back positive. All of a sudden, your life is thrown into crisis. What do you do? How do you react? We can all learn a great deal from the lives of Mary and Joseph when they learned the news of Mary’s pregnancy, and studying their reaction can help us know better how to deal with the unexpected twists and turns, as well as the great disappointments, in life.

As we consider these holy mysteries today and reflect on the familiar Christmas story once again, I want you to notice three things in particular. The first is that when life doesn’t go as you planned fear is a natural reaction.

I. When Life Doesn’t Go as You Planned Fear Is a Natural Reaction.

Have you ever noticed that whenever an angel shows up in the Bible, the first thing they say is, “Fear not!” It happened when Gabriel appeared to Mary in Luke 2. It happened when an angel appears to Joseph in a dream here in Matthew 1. It happened when the angel appeared to Zechariah to announce the birth of John the Baptist, and it happened again when the angels appeared to the shepherds in the

field. Throughout the story of the birth of Jesus, right and left we find angels saying, “Fear not!” Now, why in the world would these angels say that unless that’s the primary reaction anyone has whenever they encounter an angel of the Lord?!

Much of the art that has been painted to depict the birth of Christ portrays Jesus’ family as icons stamped in gold foil. Mary sits calmly receiving the news of the Annunciation as somewhat of a benediction – a good word from God. But that is not at all how Luke tells the story. We are told that Mary is “greatly troubled,” and she’s was “afraid” at the angel’s appearance. And when Gabriel tells her that she will give birth to a baby who will be the Son of the Most High, Mary had something far more mundane on her mind – “But I’m a virgin!” This was going to complicate her life in the worst way.

Several years ago, a young college student in Colorado, whom I will call Jessie, came to me and told of a problem in her life. She had gotten physically involved with the young man she was dating, and now she was pregnant. She wanted to know what I thought she should do. Her boyfriend wanted nothing to do with her now, her parents wanted her to have an abortion, and her friends were just as confused as she was.

I asked her, “What do you think God wants you to do?” She said that she thought she should carry the baby and give it up for adoption. It wasn’t the baby’s fault she got pregnant, so why should the baby be the one to suffer for her sin? I was so proud of Jessie’s courageous faith. She talked to her parents and told them what she wanted to do, and by God’s grace they had a change of heart and supported her decision. She moved to Germany for the duration of the pregnancy, and when the baby was born it was adopted by a wonderful couple here in North Carolina. Jessie went on to graduate from college, she also got a law degree, and later she married and now has a family of her own.

Jessie took the lonely road of bearing an illegitimate child and caring for her after the baby’s father decided he didn’t want to have anything to do with the whole affair. Jessie’s sin was no worse than many others, and yet, as she told me, it had such conspicuous consequences. She couldn’t hide the result of that single act of passion, sticking out as it did from her abdomen for months until a child emerged. No wonder the Jewish teenager Mary felt greatly troubled – she faced the same prospects of any unwed mother except *without* the act of passion.

What fears are you battling today? In what ways are you fearful this morning? Perhaps it’s a fear of failure, or a fear of abandonment. Maybe you’re afraid of getting laid off at work, or that your son or daughter is heading down the wrong path. You might be fearful that the cancer will return. Perhaps you’re fearful that if you really give over your life to Christ, He might take in a whole different direction, and you’re afraid to trust Him.

Whenever life doesn't go as we planned, the natural reaction is fear. However, we see in this passage that when the angel appeared to Joseph, he said, "Fear not!" God brought words of comfort and reassurance to calm his fears and to bring hope to his heart, and he discovered that when life doesn't go as you planned God will be there with you.

II. When Life Doesn't Go as Planned It Requires Us to Step Out in Faith.

I am deeply moved and profoundly challenged by the faith demonstrated by both Mary and Joseph at the news the angels share with them. Mary said, "*I am a handmaiden of the Lord. May it be to me as you have said.*" And Joseph responded in faith to the dream the Lord gave him, and he took Mary as his wife but didn't have sexual union with her until she gave birth to Jesus.

Have you ever thought about the conversation Joseph and Mary had when she found out she was pregnant? It must have been a doozie!

"Joseph, honey. There's something I need to tell you."

"What is it, Mary. Does your mother want to change the seating arrangement at the wedding reception again?"

"No. It's more important than that.

"I didn't think anything was more important to your mother than this wedding and the reception! That's all we've talked about for the last month and a half."

"Joseph, I'm pregnant."

"And then there is the matter of the Kosher Katering Kompany. They're going to charge an arm and a leg for all the food we're having."

"Joseph, I'm pregnant."

"You're what?"

"I'm pregnant."

"But how? By whom? Is it that lamp maker, Eliazar? I never did like the way he looked at you."

"No. It's by the Holy Spirit of God. I'm going to give birth to the Messiah. An angel told me so."

"Yeah, right. And I'm going to be made the High Priest at the temple, too. Who are you kidding, Mary?! Do you know what will happen to you when people find out? They stone girls like you for this sort of thing! Oh, Mary, how could you?!"

I believe it must have been a very difficult conversation they had. Think about how much faith was required for both Mary and Joseph to believe the Lord and take Him at His word. When life doesn't go as we planned, it requires us to step out in faith. We have to take a risk. Where does God want you to take a risk for Him today? How is He calling you to trust Him and to step out in faith? What will it take for you to believe God and take Him at His word?

III. When Life Doesn't Go as You Planned God Can Do a Miracle.

Philip Yancey notes¹ that in the stories of Luke and Matthew, the only person who seems to grasp the full meaning of the miracle God had set in motion in the birth of Jesus is the old man Simeon. You'll recall that when Mary and Joseph brought their newborn to the temple about 40 days after His birth to present Jesus to the Lord as the OT law required, Simeon recognized the baby as the Messiah and instinctively understood that conflict would surely follow.

He said, *"This child is destined to cause the falling and rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be spoken against..."* (Lk. 2:34). Then he made a prediction that a sword would pierce Mary's own soul too. Somehow Simeon could see that though on the surface little had changed in the world, underneath, everything had changed. Sure, Herod was still the king, Rome was still the oppressive empire it had always been, but with the birth of Jesus, the world changed forever. A new force had arrived that would undermine all the world's powers. A miracle had taken place. That's what sometimes happens when life doesn't go as you planned.

Last month a dear member of our church passed away – Dr. Stephen Anderson. Stephen and I became good friends the last three years of his life because we shared something in common – a battle with multiple myeloma. It's a cancer of the blood that affects your bones. There is no sure for this cancer yet, but it is treatable. Stephen had multiple myeloma, and so did my late wife Lorie. Life didn't go as either of us had planned.

However, if Stephen was here today, he'd tell you that his cancer was a gift. We had many long conversations in which he told me that it wasn't until he developed this disease that he came to experience an intimate relationship with Christ. He would say that before he got sick he was acquainted with God, but it was when he had to battle multiple myeloma that he got to know Jesus personally. And Stephen experienced a miracle of a transformation in his life.

Here is something Stephen wrote to one of his wife's dear friends. Cynthia has given me permission to share it with you. "I'm learning what living one day at a time *really* is, and that the Lord can handle more than I can.... That has not been an easy lesson for me because I always thought I could handle almost everything with just a little more effort. But with this cancer it just isn't so. (And I have learned that it never really was.) My life situation will never be as it was again. That was then, this is now.

"There is only today to make the most of and to enjoy and to find something to give to someone else. This is a great way to get out of yourself and to deal with the threat of self-pity and discover the real joy in living.... Grace for His presence and strength is always there. Self-sufficiency is a myth."

God did a miracle in Stephen's life, and it changed him for all eternity.

I've just come through the hardest two years of my life, and I've experienced a transformation of my own. And I've been amazed at how God has met me at every turn. When I sunk to the depths of despair after Lorie's death, I hit the bottom in life and I discovered that the bottom was sound because Jesus was there. And He walked with me through this last year on my journey of grief, and He turned my resentment into gratitude, my sadness into joy, and my discouragement into hope.

Make no mistake, I still miss Lorie every day, and I'm adjusting to life without her. But I have also come to a place where I have hope about my future and I'm excited about the new adventure God has for me. I, like Stephen, have discovered that sometimes God does His best work when life doesn't go as you planned. That's when He does miracles.

Isn't that what the crucifixion and the resurrection of Jesus is all about? Life certainly didn't go as the disciples had planned, but the sacrifice of Christ brought about the salvation of the world. Could it be that God is up to something good in your life through the unexpected and even difficult circumstances of your life? What miracle is God working, and you're just not aware of it yet?

Conclusion.

I began my sermon talking about *The Best Christmas Pageant Ever*, the little book about the Herdman kids and the disruption they caused at the Christmas pageant. Some of the members of the Ladies' Aid Society were beside themselves with disapproval, and all the shepherds quit because one of the Herdman girls "hits too hard." At one point the show is even briefly re-titled "Revenge at Bethlehem," and then the church catches on fire.

However, as the pageant progresses eventually the director and her little cast of characters watch in surprise as the same old Christmas story is actually rejuvenated by the creativity, energy, and unexpected sincerity of a misunderstood young family. When life didn't go as people had planned for the pageant, God showed up in the most amazing way.

Is life not going as you had planned this Christmas? Have your hopes been dashed to the ground? Do you find yourself in a place of desperation, and you don't know what to do or where to turn? Fear not. Jesus is with you. And He does some of His best work when life doesn't go as planned. Look to Him and ask Him to help you. He will, just like He did for Mary and Joseph that first Christmas long ago.

¹ Adapted from Philip Yancey, *The Jesus I Never Knew*, p. 33.