

God's in Charge

Fear Not Series, December 12/13, 2020 | Luke 1:26-38

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WE DON'T ALWAYS DEAL WELL WITH CHANGE.

In 1941, the United States military didn't know what to do with changing technology.

For some time, the military had been developing radar to watch air traffic.

The British had become quite good with radar during the Battle of Britain and tried to help.

However, the change was a bit much for parts of the chain of command.

Four radar units were deployed to Hawaii, but the commander in charge of Pearl Harbor didn't understand radar, didn't trust it, and would only allow the units to run for four hours a day.

On Sunday, December 7, the mobile radar trucks were supposed to stop work at 7 a.m.

Since the truck sent to pick up the men after their shift was late, the radar operators decided to stay and get in some additional training.

They saw something big coming in and called in the sighting. They thought they saw hundreds of planes. It looked like a possible attack.

Their warning wasn't taken seriously enough, because the military didn't yet know what to do with changing technology like radar. At 7:55 a.m., Japanese aircraft attacked Pearl Harbor.

How well do you deal with change?

Different people with different types of personalities deal with change differently.

I'm fascinated with personality inventories.

One of my favorites is the StrengthsFinder from Gallup. It catalogues 34 common patterns of behavior. It gives names to those patterns, helps us to understand which themes are most present in each of us, and helps us to plan to leverage those patterns.

One of the themes is adaptability. It's the theme that enables some of us to "go with the flow."

In past training sessions, I've heard partners of mine describe the adaptability theme with a scenario. You plan a family vacation to a tropical island to escape the cold and snow during winter; you go to the airport to leave on the vacation and find out, once you arrive, that the tropical island you were planning to visit has been closed down by an unexpected natural disaster. How do you respond? People with adaptability will quickly and easily pick a new destination, rebook their vacation, and fly off to that new destination, excited about the adventure that they're on.

Let's just say that the rest of us will struggle a bit more to adjust when our plans are disrupted unexpectedly. Some of us will fear that our world is ending. How do you deal with change?

The Bible offers us an entirely different perspective on change.

And a different perspective on change gives us different options for responding.

Since we are surrounded by change, a different perspective and new options sound really good right now, don't they?

MARY'S LIFE CHANGED UNEXPECTEDLY.

Mary's life changed unexpectedly in Luke 1:26-33.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!" But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be. And the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

The angel Gabriel appeared again.

Gabriel is one of the messengers God prefers to send to share his messages with us.

Gabriel appeared earlier in Luke chapter 1 to a priest named Zechariah. His message to Zechariah was that Zechariah and his wife, Elizabeth, would have a child, despite the fact that they were both past child-bearing years.

Six months had passed since Zechariah returned home and Elizabeth became pregnant.

Now God sent Gabriel to Galilee, to Nazareth, and appeared to a young woman named Mary.

Mary was probably 13-15 years old. She was engaged to be married to a man named Joseph, who was descended from the house of King David.

Gabriel's message to Mary was that she was "favored" and should "fear not."

Gabriel was so excited to meet Mary that he dispensed with the normal greeting, "Fear not."

Instead, what Gabriel said in English includes words like "greetings" and "favored one" and "you have found favor with God." These words all use the root that means "grace" and "gift." God was graciously giving Mary a great gift.

Of course, Mary was troubled and a little bit afraid at the sight of an angel, so Gabriel did seek to reassure her and told her to "fear not."

She was going to conceive a child and have a baby, a son, and she would name him Jesus.

We are reminded that God the Creator is constantly able to create and surprise us!

Mary's baby would be extraordinary.

Gabriel told Mary that Jesus would be "**great**" all on his own.

He would also be the "**Son of the Most High.**" That's a New Testament translation of one of the names of God in the Old Testament, "Elyon."

Jesus would be considered a **descendant of David**, because Mary's fiancé, Joseph, was a descendant of David. Jesus, then, would sit on David's throne. God had promised that a descendant of David would always rule Israel.

The son of David would rule over the “**house of Jacob**” which is just another name for Israel.

Most importantly, this rule for Jesus would never end. He would be king **forever**.

What Gabriel was telling Mary was that her son, Jesus, would be the true King. Yes, he would be the rightful king of Israel in place of his ancestor, David. Yes, he would be the true king of Israel forever. But he is the world’s true King. He would be her King. He would be my King. He’s your King. He was and is in charge. Will we accept that Jesus is in charge?

I don’t know about you, but I don’t always deal with unexpected changes or surprises very well.

I think back to my 21st birthday. I was in college at the time.

People were kind on my birthday and wished me a happy birthday.

By the evening, I had frankly forgotten that it was my birthday.

That evening, a friend who lived in a house on the edge of campus called and asked if I could come over to his house. He had broken up with his girlfriend.

I went over to his house to listen to him and cheer him up.

When I arrived, he met me outside. We went for a walk. When we got back to the house, all the lights were off. We went up to the door. I opened the door in front of him, stepped in, and turned on the light.

There were people all over the room. For a second, no one said anything.

I turned to my friend and said, “Shh ... there’s a bunch of people in here sleeping.” To this day I have no idea why.

In the next second, everyone inside yelled, “Surprise!” I still didn’t realize it was a birthday party for me. I don’t deal well with surprises.

Mary was dealing with some gigantic and unexpected changes in her life. I’m sure it was a lot for her to process!

FOR MARY, THIS HAD TO SEEM LIKE THE WRONG TIME.

Mary wrestled with the timing in Luke 1:34-37.

And Mary said to the angel, “How will this be, since I am a virgin?” And the angel answered her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God. And behold, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month with her who was called barren. For nothing will be impossible with God.”

Mary was betrothed to Joseph.

To say that Mary was planning a wedding would be an understatement.

Mary and Joseph were bound to each other, and their families were obligated to one another in a legal contract that could only be broken by a divorce under dire circumstances.

Mary becoming pregnant could derail her marriage to Joseph and ruin everything.

If Joseph decided to divorce her, it would ruin Mary’s reputation and her family’s reputation. It could very easily ruin her life.

If Joseph stayed in the relationship, his reputation could be ruined as well.

This was definitely the wrong time for a pregnancy for Mary. Naturally, she had questions.

Gabriel reassured Mary that this pregnancy would be supernatural.

Mary had natural questions about how this pregnancy would come about!

Rather than express disappointment at her questions, Gabriel addressed Mary's concerns and gave her a relatively straightforward explanation.

Gabriel basically said that this pregnancy would happen in supernaturally creative ways that remind us of **Genesis 1:2**:

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters

This would be another creative act of God, so the child would be the Son of God.

God is able to do the impossible.

God had just done the impossible, as Gabriel informed Mary.

Elizabeth, her elderly cousin or relative, had become pregnant. That kind of thing would only be possible with God.

And while what the angel said seemed impossible, and while the changes she might face would make her life feel impossible, nothing is impossible with God, who spoke the universe into being. Even though, for Mary, this had to seem like the WRONG TIME.

GOD'S TIME IS THE RIGHT TIME.

The "right time" is God's specialty.

We tend to think of good times and bad times for things.

The New Testament uses a term that means "due time" or "appointed time." It's the moment when everything is ready.

The term in Greek is "Kairos." A "Kairos" moment is God's time, the truly right time.

When Jesus began his ministry in Mark 1:15, he said that it's "Kairos," it's time:

... "The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God is at hand; repent and believe in the gospel."

Paul calls us to recognize the "Kairos" moment or right time in Romans 13:11,

Besides this you know the time, that the hour has come for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we first believed.

So while God's message to Mary may have felt like the wrong time to Mary, it was actually the very right time. Why?

God's timing is driven by the right plan.

Assuming that there's a wrong time for things to happen assumes that history is chaotic or random, or that we're the ones with the plan that guides history.

Quite the contrary. History isn't random or chaotic. Nor do we guide history. Rather, God is the one with a plan for history. It's the right plan, and fulfilling that plan leads to God's right timing. As Paul write in Titus 1:1-3,

Paul, a servant of God and an apostle of Jesus Christ, for the sake of the faith of God's elect and their knowledge of the truth, which accords with godliness, in hope of eternal life, which God, who never lies, promised before the ages began and at the proper time manifested in his word through the preaching with which I have been entrusted by the command of God our Savior ...

Did you see? The plan began before history. It unfolds in the right time, not the wrong time. Plus, it ends at the right time in the right way. Revelation 1:3 assures us:

Blessed is the one who reads aloud the words of this prophecy, and blessed are those who hear, and who keep what is written in it, for the time is near.

God's plan is driven by the right nature.

God, we know, is omniscient. He's all-knowing. There's nothing hidden from him that he doesn't know. He's got all the facts, knows how all things go, and knows how all things turn out.

God is also omnipresent. He's present at all places and even at all times.

God is omnipotent. He's got all the power and isn't lacking in any power to devise his plan, oversee his plan, or implement his plan.

And God is omnibenevolent. He's all good. He loves creation, he loves us, his love never fails, and he never does anything that isn't fundamentally good.

God's right nature, plan, and timing are demonstrated in the wisdom of the cross.

Plenty of people doubt or actually deny everything I've just said about God. They say that God is not all good, nor is he all-powerful, he isn't all-present, nor is he even all-knowing; his plan is wrong or missing; his sense of timing is sometimes awful.

The same thing was said about the cross. Paul openly acknowledged what history has frequently said, that it's difficult to see the world being saved by a Galilean peasant the Roman empire condemned as a criminal, humiliated on an instrument of torture, and buried in an unmarked grave. God's loving us, taking on human flesh, dying, rising, and coming again is foolish superstition. In 1 Corinthians 1, Paul called the cross "foolishness" to those who don't have Jesus.

However, in 1 Corinthians 1:18 Paul also wrote,

For the word of the cross is folly to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God.

Out of love, God did take on human flesh, become a Galilean peasant, suffer scorn and rejection by his own people, submit himself to death on a cross, rise again, offer us forgiveness and new and eternal life, and promise to come again to make the world right. It sounds like foolishness! But it's the right God fulfilling the right plan at the right time.

No matter how unexpected and wrong that timing may have seemed.

In Luke 1:38 we read that Mary decided to trust God's timing.

*And Mary said, "Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word."
And the angel departed from her.*

Mary was on board.

She didn't just passively assent to what she's heard, though.

She embraced what Gabriel said to her. She trusted God's plan. She declared herself a willing participant and offered herself to be the "servant" of God, his co-conspirator in his plan.

CAN WE TRUST GOD'S TIMING?

Our plans change all the time.

Some of the biggest changes in our lives happen according to plan. We're born, we grow up, we graduate, we get jobs, and we build relationships. We do many of those things according to our own plans.

But it's normal for us to face unexpected changes to our plans all the time. We change jobs. Relationships end. We get sick. People die. Do cars ever wreck at an expected time?

During these days, the unexpected changes keep piling up.

What are some of the negative reactions we have when our plans change?

Feel anxious. Anxiety is what we experience when something makes us nervous or tense. The Mayo Clinic says there may be times when anxiety makes it difficult for us to concentrate or sleep. It can upset our stomachs. Anxiety can even move past a natural response to a disorder that stays with us. Some of us react to the changes with anxiety.

Try to control the situation ourselves. We work hard to avoid an outcome we fear and to get an outcome we prefer. In the process, we drive ourselves and everyone around us.

Mourn the change. We get sad because things have changed; that sadness can become paralyzing at times and turn into deep depression.

Resent the change. It turns to bitterness in our soul.

If those reactions are bad, we could call the advice the ancient Stoics gave us "good."

Stoicism was an ancient philosophy that taught that the world is what it is. If the world is what it is, then we have choices to make. We can choose what we will feel and what we will do. The Stoics would say that those choices make all the difference.

Roman philosopher Seneca in his *Letters from a Stoic* wrote:

Floods will rob us of one thing, fire of another. These are conditions of our existence which we cannot change. What we can do is adopt a noble spirit, such a spirit as befits a good person, so that we may bear up bravely under all that fortune sends us and bring our wills into tune with nature's. - Seneca, *Letters from a Stoic*

Adopting the posture that we can't change much in the world but that we can change ourselves is better than being blown about by the winds of every change that comes our way. Let's call that a good response from the Stoics. But the Bible teaches us that we can do better.

A better response would to trust God.

The Bible has shown us that God's right nature produces a right plan in the right time.

Can we trust in God's nature—his knowledge, presence, power, and goodness?

Can we trust in God's plan—that he is saving the world and us in the process?

Can we trust in God's timing—even when unexpected changes come our way?

If we can trust God, then unexpected changes become the movements of our good God in a good plan unveiled at a good time. Faith like that is better than even the response the Stoics suggest. However, Mary took this thought one step further, and so can we.

The best response would be to make ourselves available as God's servants.

Mary trusted in God's goodness, his plan, and his timing, so much that she held nothing back.

She put her fears aside, she shelved the plan she had for her life, and she offered herself instead to help her good God with his good plan in his good timing.

She became an agent of the Kingdom.

When our lives change—even in dramatic and unexpected ways—may God give us the faith to become a part of what God is doing to save the world and save us.