

Bible study presented at the Tenth Triennial Convention (2017) Minneapolis, Minnesota

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Hi. Good morning!

I have three kids, and I will tell you a story about them in a moment, but first, I know that you are from all over. Some of you have traveled quite a way, so I want to give a shout-out to all of the congregations that got me here today. Maybe you know one of them. These are the places that kept my baptismal promises for me. I was baptized at St. Andrews in Minnesota. I was raised by Calvary Lutheran Church in Solana Beach, California.

I was confirmed, married, and ordained at Normandale Lutheran Church in Edina, Minnesota. And I served my internship at Sierra Lutheran Church in Sierra Vista. And my first call was St. John's Lutheran Church in Minneapolis. My second call was Zion Lutheran Church in central Minneapolis. And now I am two months into my third call as part of this great experiment. There's a very large congregation here in the Twin Cities, more than 4,000 members, called Bethlehem Lutheran Church in South Minneapolis, and 18 months ago, they consolidated together with a congregation in the suburbs that's about 60 years old that was in decline called Minnetonka Lutheran Church, and today they are this grand two campuses, one church experiment called Bethlehem Lutheran Church dash Twin Cities, and I am comma Minnetonka campus, exclamation point.

So we have more punctuation than we need. But it's fun to think about what do we do together and how do we be the church across time and space in the Twin Cities. So I am the missionary developer out at that second campus, and we are figuring it out with the Holy Spirit as we go.

So if you have questions about what this experiment looks like, keep an eye on us from wherever you are in the United States, over the course of the next few months and years. We have a lot to learn, and we are excited to share that with the wider church.

All right. So my kiddos. This morning we were sitting down at breakfast, and my son, who is six, said what are you going to tell them about God, Mom? That's his question most mornings if he sees me wearing a dress. He figures I am going to be in front of people. He saw that I straightened my hair on a 90-degree day, he figured something important was happening today.

I said I am going to talk to them about how God loves to interrupt us. And I have three-year-old twin daughters, and one of them goes, uh-oh, interrupting is not good.

So now that my daughters can say full sentences and they have a lot of stories to tell and there's often things that happen in the other room and when they come back in crying and hitting, there's three different versions to the story, we are working on not interrupting each other in my house. And so I had a little bit of explaining to do around this God who likes to interrupt us, goes looking to be interrupted.

Jasper proceeded to tell his favorite joke. He's learned all of his jokes at a coffee hour table he shares with all men over 75. He tells me I am not allowed to sit at that table because I don't know any good jokes and because I am a lady.

But he tells his jokes with me, and I am learning from him.

And so his favorite one is one I am sure that you have heard about the interrupted cow. Knock-knock.

Who's there?

Interrupting cow.

Interrupt ...

Moo.

So that's how he tells it. The girls are still learning it.

They would tell it like this. Knock-knock.

Who's there

Interrupting cow.

Interrupting cow who?

I am going to interrupt you like a cow now. Moo.

I don't know about you, but I prefer the second, the very playful, forewarned interruption. That's how I like my interruptions in life. That's not really how life works; is it? Everything good and hard about my life has been an interruption, and maybe that's true for you too, because those interruptions break me open from my own status quo by interrupting my agenda, my comfort zone, and my expectations. These interruptions are one way God likes to work on stubborn hearts, stubborn people and communities and institutions.

And because I know you got to hear Pastor Jodi yesterday -- how many people fell in love with Pastor Jodi yesterday?

My son Jasper's first communion was at Humble Walk, so I want to tell you that story, a wonderful interruption for me as a pastor and a parent. Don't worry, we are getting to the Bible. Don't worry.

He was a year and a half, so very much toddling around, and he had this one orange jacket that he wore all the time, it was kind of a sweatshirt jacket, and he always wore the hood up, and he is a little bit of an observer. Humble Walk meets on Sunday afternoon, so sometimes when I am tired of being my kid's pastor and I just want to be my kids' mother, we go to Humble Walk, and I love Humble Walk because kids are really leading the pace, and there's room for mistakes, and they are always punting. You are always doing something with your hands. It's very tactile.

Jasper played a sound effect noise in telling the Bible story. The prayers of the people were this long butcher block paper timeline, and we were all coloring. And sharing of the peace went on forever and ever. He was playing with some model clay during the sermon. Then by the time it got to communion, Pastor Jodi's daughter, then six, was standing next to her ready to serve bread, I think as the shorter people line.

And before we were done saying the Lord's Prayer, Jasper was up, the first one in line. And he was ready to go. And I hadn't noticed him moving toward Jodi, but it was clear from his body language, as an observer and a reactive kid, he knew that everything about the service so far had been for him. And why wouldn't this be for him too? Right? So he gets up there, she gives him this huge chunk of bread, and -- her daughter did because he is in the little folks line, gives him this huge chunk of bread. As soon as we say amen. And he walks over and he dunks his whole fist -- in the chalice. And it comes up -- and he is a tidy, neat kid, does not like to get messy. His orange sweatshirt jacket sleeve is totally covered in wine. And he lifts up his fist, and he squeezes the bread.

And it just runs down his whole arm, and this is how he took his first communion, like talk about incarnation embodiment.

So that is one of the many interruptions. Whatever ideas I had about his first communion got put in the backseat because Humble Walk did it right.

So these interruptions, the way that God works on our stubborn lives and hearts. If you have a Bible with you, I encourage you to turn to the beginning of Mark's gospel. We are going to be in Chapter 5 in just a minute. But before we get started, I want to make clear this theme of interruptions in Mark's gospel.

Jesus is constantly on the way somewhere. There's this word that comes up over and over again "immediately" or "and then." "On the way to." We are always on the move, and Jesus hardly slows down in this gospel. And so even just in the first chapter, these are interruptions that happen just in the first chapter. Jesus shows up in the wilderness and interrupts John wishing to be baptized. And then the heavens break open with voice before Jesus is even up out of the water. The spirit drives Jesus into the wilderness while he is still soaking wet. Jesus interrupts Simon and Andrew fishing to call them to be disciples. A man with an unclean spirit interrupts Jesus teaching in the synagogue. Jesus retreats to pray and the disciples go find him. They interrupt him, asking for more teaching and more healing. And then a leper interrupts Jesus begging to be made clean. That's just the first chapter. There are interruptions everywhere.

Jesus continues to clarify and expand the law and equip followers and heal strangers and see the outcast and tell parables through the end of chapter 4. And just when those disciples and the crowds think they are getting a rhythm, they think they have an idea of what this is going to be like, Jesus interrupts their agenda and their newfound fame saying to the disciples, come on, let's go across the sea to the other side.

These are brave and beautiful and very inconvenient words. This call to leave everything that they know and everything that they have to sail by night to a new and strange place where nothing is certain. And it says Jesus gets in the boat just as he is. He doesn't need to go research. He doesn't need to go pack. He just gets in the boat as he is. If they are going to go win at the far-off mission -- because I am sure those disciples are feeling like they are starting to win at this, they've got a handle on it -- they better use their time well crossing that sea. So if I were there, I would be using Google Maps and looking up demographic research and consulting with guest speakers and wondering if Lutheran Social Services has published a curriculum about who our neighbor across the sea is. I would want to develop a vision statement or a team goal for the mission.

But meanwhile, Jesus is sleeping. He is resting up. He hit the hay. He doesn't even know the storm kicking up. So maybe they don't need to overthink it or try to control what happens in the morning because when they get there, they are going to be interrupted anyway. This is news to me by the time I get to this point in Mark's gospel, and it's news to me again and again in my own faith journey, that Jesus gets interrupted, and he doesn't mind being interrupted. And hear in Mark chapter 5, Jesus goes looking for interruptions. I am going to say that one more time. Jesus gets interrupted, and he doesn't mind being interrupted, and he even goes out looking for interruptions.

So here we are in Mark 5. If we can have that on the screen up here. Thank you.

So let's be there for a moment. With one foot out of the boat, a man is right up in Jesus' face interrupting him with this really inconvenient and uncomfortable truth. In Mark's gospel, only the demons call him Jesus, Son of God, Son of the most high God, unsolicited and in public. He is standing right there, and Jesus face, the veins in his next pumping, sweat beading on his brow. Maybe the two in the boat were ambling out after Jesus, but we get hit with the town gossips. We learned he had lived among the tombs and no one could restrain him anymore. He had retched apart chains, broke them to pieces. No one had the strength to subdue him, to make him go away. So he was howling night and day and hurting himself.

We take this into account. We are huddling on shore trying to draft a safety plan. Okay. What haven't they tried? Do they need different supplies? How do we minimize his impact on the community? What can we do to make this go away, to make the pain, discomfort, and awkwardness go away, to make him go away? And meanwhile, Jesus is still nose to nose with the man and his demons. Meanwhile, Jesus is not strategizing or avoiding eye contact or feeling flustered. He's busy seeing the man and simply asking "What is your name?"

He takes what we would call a problem or an issue or an interruption and recognizes God's creation. You are a human, and I see you, and you have a name.

I have preached so many sermons about that one man, chained and abandoned, zeroing in on the drama of his moans and howls, his wild griefs, his uncontrollable pain that this town has worked so hard to unsee and unhear. I have even led Bible studies about swine, about pigs herded right in front of the disciples who don't eat pork, about whether or not pigs can swim, about how angry the swineherds would have been when thousands of pigs ran off a cliff and affected their economy. There are so many tantalizing details about this far-away place, these Galileans who are new to their vocation as disciples, who have crossed over to the other side only to find legions battling inside a tormented man and demons who know Jesus by name, demons who can negotiate their way into pigs.

But maybe, maybe Jesus didn't come for the man or the demons or the pigs. Maybe he crossed that stormy sea looking for this very town. These people who think they have everything figured out, who are doing their best to keep things under control, who like to gather the facts before they feel anything, maybe Jesus came because he is going out looking for interruptions and because he's going out looking to interrupt communities too. Because we know Jesus comes whenever we've silenced the conversation, whenever we are threatened by the unknown, whenever we've banished those we fear to the dead places, whenever we've resigned ourselves to misunderstand each other as "those people over there."

If he'd come for just that one man possessed by the demons, he would have handed him a life jacket and made space for him in that boat, inviting him away from home and into a life of wandering and discipleship. And he could have. He does it at times. Jesus could have scooped him up away from all of that fear and shame that he endures on the margins of community, in the cold stench of the tombs. But if he leaves, the people won't get to experience resurrection from the dead. And if he leaves, people might only remember him as this vague liability that they once bound and hid because it was so uncomfortable. If he leaves, they will only recall him with their heads instead of knowing him with their hearts. So Jesus tells him to stay. Go home, he says, back into the midst of a community that needs to hear your story, that needs to face your pain, that needs to learn to love you and be changed by the death and resurrection that's already in their midst.

Our agenda and our comfort zone and our expectations of being community and being the church are constantly being interrupted, just like this.

I am going to ask you to share some stories with each other in just a minute, but I will get your juices flowing with a few of mine. I was teaching in a congregation a few years ago, and a leader from the congregation who was attending my Bible study asked me for some advice on a situation. It's a big congregation, very high church, deep culture of piety, and a lot of expectations about how the sanctuary should be used. She says she is an usher during the Lenten services on Wednesday nights, and the last Wednesday night, a bunch of confirmation kids came late into the vesper service, and one of them had a whole box of Domino's pizza and started eating it in the sanctuary. And they were talking loud enough that some of the older members who were trying to be reflective were distracted and frowning and frustrated and looking at her to do something. And she said and I don't know why it matters, but he wasn't even sharing the pizza with his friends. He was just eating the whole pizza by himself.

Then the sanctuary started to smell like pizza, and I just don't know why he had to do that in the sanctuary. We have speakers in the narthex. I went over and shooshed him, then I felt bad that I shooshed him, and I didn't know what to do.

So I guess my question is how do we get the pizza out of the sanctuary?

And I said, or, maybe the question is who is eating pizza in the sanctuary? Who are these kids? Why haven't they had dinner yet? What's going on in their lives? Do you know their names? Are they at the service because it's a confirmation requirement or because they want to be? Have -- do they have a bulletin? Do they know what time it starts? Do they need a little bit of background on the rules of the space? But you can't go there until you know who they are.

What a strange interruption in the middle of a holy space for those people. She rolled her eyes and

said, oh, I knew you were going to make it relational. That's so much harder.

Just this last Sunday, my kids were in worship at our new congregation, and my kids take those busy bags that you've prepared that hang on the hook outside of the sanctuary very seriously. They don't want to go to Sunday school, they don't want to come up for children's time. If they are lacing a cardboard bunny with a shoelace, they're going to do it with their whole heart until they are finished. And my youngest daughter had about four more holes to go in lacing this bunny with a shoelace. But the usher was back to their pew, and it was time to go up for communion. And she was going to finish because this is what she does in church, and she wanted to do a good job. And without really reading the situation, the usher came back and hesitated only for a moment and then said to my husband -- who, the saint is trying to wrangle all three of these up for communion -- are you guys coming?

Now, if Tova, my daughter, had been a 90-year-old who needed some time to get up with her walker, I know he would have waited. It would have been okay for there to be a little bit of a gap in the line. It would have been okay for the whole rhythm of ushering to change. But this is new to them, that there would be this little kid who takes busy bags seriously. You gave this to me. You told me to do this. I am going to finish it. So we have some teaching to do around how -- what matters, the rhythm of communion and whether the music ends exactly on time or whether kids can come as they are when they are ready to the table.

My previous congregation held space for all kinds of people, and sometimes I felt more like a bouncer than a preacher. It was hard to hold space for dignity and safety and belonging in a really dynamic and diverse neighborhood full of challenges related to addiction and recovery and mental illness. And so sometimes the way that our worship services or our fellowship time were impacted by dementia or paranoia or schizophrenia meant that I felt like a mama bear or a bouncer, like I said, holding that space. Maybe we are not going to get to everything we said we were going to do, and maybe it's not going to look the way we thought it was going to look. But we are here and we are together, and we'll change so that everybody can be here.

On June 18, I was preaching at the larger of the two campuses I serve at, and this text that I am sharing with you now had been chosen as the preaching text before I came on board, and my job was to connect it to a mental health ministry. And I said oh, you are picking the Gerasene demoniac for the Mental Health Day, it's such a cliché and not a help at all. It was the same time that the Philando Castile verdict came out in the Twin Cities. It was also the same day that our pastor of 23 years was actively dying during worship. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer seven months earlier and had really taken a turn in the last two weeks, and so we knew this during worship, and thank goodness for all of those healing hymns on docket and this powerful text about community.

Everybody was there needing something different. It's a big sanctuary with a lot of big feelings, and everybody was clinging on to something different that the spirit gave me to share.

A few women met me at communion, came out of whatever communion line they were supposed to be in, and came over near me and had the semicolon symbol tattooed on their wrists and made sure to show me. That's a symbol for those who have attempted suicide that their story continues. It paused for a moment, but it's not over yet, and it's a public witness to break the stereotype. I am still here and I am a safe person to talk about it with. So they looked at me as if to say thank you for talking about mental health in church. I need to know that that intersects with my faith.

Another woman on her way out was in tears and said I needed my church to say Philando's name today. I need to know that God is sad about this and that the church is feeling this. And so thank you for saying his name during your sermon.

I can't fix all of the hurt that was there that morning, but I could name things. I could interrupt the liturgy with a 15-minute sermon that just named the laments that we carry, the things that we feel that are hard about this life. I brought some of those laments with me today, and I think that they are laments all of us share. This is what we did in worship that morning. I would like to do it with you. So after I name one of our laments, please respond "How long, O Lord," not from your head but from your heart. How long O Lord.

How long O Lord.

Kick it up a notch, though. How long, O Lord?

How long, O Lord?

There you are. So for the stigma and weight of mental illness.

How long, O Lord?

For blood shed and fear of those we restrain with shackles?

How long, O Lord.

For the earth's songs and her screams, her bounty parceled like property.

How long, O Lord.

For trials and verdicts that leave us confounded and divided.

How long, O Lord.

For victims named like Philando, and unnamed, blamed or silenced.

How long, O Lord.

For the crimes of your church and the ways we have misused the gospel.

How long, O Lord.

For unjust systems and those oppressed by war.

How long, O Lord.

For all the children home for the summer, some safer than others.

How long, O Lord.

For our allegiance to the status quo and the town gossip.

How long, O Lord.

For communities waiting to board boats and cross to the other side.

How long, O Lord.

For your disciples whenever we refuse to be interrupted.

How long, O Lord.

So I am going to give you some time to think and then turn to your neighbors. I want you to think about a few things in this text based on those stories I shared and in your own personal lives and in your faith communities. What are the seas you are called to cross? Think about the borders in your life. What is your Sea of Galilee these days that is stormy and you'd rather not? So the first keyword is "border."

My next question for you is who is howling in your life? What

and injustice has your ears stopped listening to or muted? Who is howling around you?

And then I'll want you to share with a neighbor a time you have been interrupted and in hindsight it was holy.

All right. So I am going to give you ten minutes to turn toward a buddy, find a buddy, and talk about your borders, who is howling, and what do you know about holy interruptions? I'll call you back together in ten.

Small group discussions)

All right. Knock-knock.

Who's there.

Interrupting pastor.

Interrupting pas --

The Lord be with you.

Let's come back together. We are not going to share these stories on the microphone. It's a large group. But please hold what you heard from your buddies in prayer. There are some borders. There is some howling. There are some interruptions worthy of our prayers.

So Mark 5, in this whole rhythm of Mark's gospel, is inviting us to buckle up and ditch the 20-year plan. Jesus shows us that being God in the flesh means a lifetime of interruptions that are smelly and loud and uncomfortable. They are painful interruptions that cannot be reduced to the town's gossip or hidden away in the tombs or kept contained like a problem or an issue or a virus. Because the interruptions are the heartbeat of life in Christ.

Not only does Jesus get interrupted, but Jesus doesn't mind being interrupted. And furthermore, Jesus goes looking for interruptions.

Christ is showing up on our shores, the shores of our great divides, wherever our secrets are howl-

ing, wherever our shackled shame is running ahead to meet us at the boat. So today I do not hear one man who is skeptically checking, what do you have to do with me? No, I hear this legion of our laments and our fears and our sorrows and the ache of deep and holy hope that's asking Jesus: Have you come for me? Can you see me? Can you hear me? I beg of you, Jesus, Son of the most high God, deal with me, all of me, just the way that I am, for I am a body broken and a mind tormented and a spirit crushed. A community that's divided from itself. Are you here because you are going to deal with me? And Jesus confronts this pain without compromise. It's not a story about a man or a magic trick or a herd of swine. It's a promise that God's mercy and justice can sew us back together, not without hard loss and pain, not without tension and time, but an enduring promise that our ignored and oppressed members will be gathered from the forgotten places back into life as one body, once dead and now alive because God loves to be interrupted and cross stormy seas for us, for all of us.

God shows up because God can hear it when our bodies are howling and moaning from the tombs of the Garasenes, and God shows up because God can see how numb we've become to the howls and the moans that are around us. God shows up to be interrupted and then interrupts the deadness of our hearts and our bodies and minds with the heartbeat of life in Christ, saying: What is your name? You are human. You are created good. You have a name. I see you. I want you to remember how to feel and be together.

So when Jesus sees and heals the man, he is stirring the whole pot. He changes all the rote dynamics of this town, daring them to engage what's hard and scary and impossible about caring for each other. He invites their feelings and hopes and frustrations and compassion back into the assembly. And that makes a huge mess.

We know that change is quick, but transition takes a lot of time. In the meantime, they are left with quite a mess that change brings. But perhaps they will begin by stopping to ask each other how they are doing and waiting long enough for an honest answer instead of: How are you? Good. How are you? Good. And maybe a few will wander down to the tombs and give themselves permission to howl their own without wondering what people will think. Some might try naming the inconvenient things that hold so much power when unspoken, the injustices of the world and their own privilege yet unused for the sake of others. Several will move away because the trauma of that day Jesus showed up is too much. They learned something dark and true about themselves, and they would rather live a comfortable and naive life somewhere else.

But over time, those who stay, they will practice holy interruption as this invitation to be God in the flesh, with the courage to cross boundaries even without a plan, prepared only to be themselves and to be ready for what or who greets them when they get there. They will be less concerned about the town gossip or charts and graphs. They will slowly stop comparing things to the way they once were, finally trusting that God is invested in the here and now too. This is also good. And if they forget, the man who was once a legion of many will be there to remind him what happened that day that Jesus showed up and made a mess out of things. He will take them down to the tombs to help them find their lament again, for lament is a good way creation gets to interrupt God. That's what happens when we shouted "how long, O Lord."

We are the disciples on the boat, and we are the people in town, and we are the man running to meet Jesus on the shore. He has come down from heaven and all the way across the stormy sea to be interrupted by our very own howling truth. Have you come for us? Can you see us? Can you hear us? We beg you, Jesus, son of the most high God, to deal with all of who we are and all of the ways we are a body broken and a mind tormented and a spirit crushed and a community that's divided from itself. Are you here because you are willing to deal with us? And that's when Jesus, well rested, steps

out of the boat and lets us get right in his face. He speaks directly to our demons and our divisions and our legions of pain. He says I have come for you. I see you. I hear you. I live and I die and I rise because I want nothing more than to deal with you. And I will sew you back together because you belong to each other for the seek of the good.

We know just as well as the man in this Bible story that being returned to community from the outside is complicated and uncomfortable and messy and dangerous. If those who are there don't already know and believe and live like we belong to reach other.

And so sisters, because Jesus steps off the boat, we are met with a God willing to make a mess with us. And we engage in the howls and the moans of this world boldly, and our shame will not be shackled into submission. For this is the land of the grieving and the living. We are the church. We are this constellation of holy interruptions. We are Christ's own body, and he has come for all of us.

Is that true? Can I get an amen?

Amen!

Before we pray, I want to tell you one more story about my son. I don't want you to think I am raising a chauvinist who won't let me sit with him at coffee hour. Get this. Part of the reason I joined a staff two months ago and I am not a solo pastor anymore is I want my kids and my spouse to have a pastor who is not this gal, to hear other voices and for me to get to be their mom more often. So the first Sunday at my new congregation, a white male pastor in his late 60s got up and did the announcements and the opening liturgy, and after worship, I went up to my son Jasper and said what do you I this of my new church? He said Mom, guess what. They let guys be pastors here.

Let us pray.

Good and gracious God, we like things a certain way. We like to have a plan. We like to be in the know. And you love to interrupt us. You let us get right in your face. You know our name, and you claim us, our mess. You teach us how to feel again so we can be in real relationships, so we have the courage to cross divides. May we see the interruptions in our lives as holy invitations to be your flesh on earth.

Amen.