

Hi everybody, and Merry 2020 Christmas. If you're like most Americans, maybe like most humans, not only are you looking forward to Christmas, you're actually looking forward like never before to new year. I think we're all looking forward to looking back on 2020. It's not all been bad, but there was enough bad to leave us scratching our heads and wondering what in the world just happened and why did it happen? And why does so much happen all at the same time?

In fact, I think most of us have an insatiable desire to find meaning or purpose and even the most random events in life, especially the negative events. The events that seem to have no purpose or serve no purpose, events that on the surface seem to indicate there is no meaning or purpose to life, that life is well, it's just all random. That Richard Dawkins was right when he said that some people are gonna get hurt and some people are going to get lucky, and you won't find any rhyme or reason in it. No justice, no design, no evil, no good, just pitiless indifference. Merry Christmas everyone. I mean, that's certainly one approach

to understanding the why behind the what, that basically there is no why.

But here's the thing. Even when what we see and experience points in the direction of random, pointless and purposeless, there's something in us. Isn't it true? There's something in us that resists surrendering to that notion. We find ourselves scrambling to find good in the bad, positive in the negative, purpose for our pain. And I should point out that I don't run into many people who are obsessed with trying to make sense out of the good things in life. I've never met anyone who was wrestling with why their parents didn't divorce, why their kids are so healthy, why they didn't lose their job. I mean, we kind of expect those things. We just don't expend much energy looking for meaning and purpose in the good things. We consider the good things to be normal, because let's be honest, because good things suit our purposes. And that's really all the purpose I generally need.

I want my life to be good. So anything that is a means to that end, I don't have to find meaningful, right? It's just good. It's

obvious. Well, good things are a means to my end. But the exceptions, the hiccups, the interruptions, that call from the doctor or maybe from your child's school, why God, what's the reason for this, is there a God? Now, it's all a little bit hypocritical but I get it, because I'm certainly not immune from it. And that thing in it... I think that thing in us that longs to make sense out of life, I think that's the image of God stamped on our souls.

Or as Solomon refers to it, when he wrote these words, he says it's eternity in our hearts. Here's what he wrote. He said, "He, God has made everything beautiful in its time. He has also set eternity in the human heart". That is, there is something in us that knows there's more to this life than just this life. "Yet no one can fathom what God has done from beginning to end". In other words, we all long for sort of meta narrative that makes sense of things, a comprehensive explanation for what's going on in the world, but more specifically, what's going on in our world. And we long for one, because there is one.

As CS Lewis wrote, "If I find in myself, if I find in myself a desire which no experience in this world can satisfy, the most probable explanation is that I was made for another world". We assume, in fact, we almost can't help but assume there's a plan. And when things go off the rails from our perspective, that's when we're most interested in knowing what the plan is, right? That's when we look for reassurances that God is still in control, that God is still up to something. So of course we ask why, because we're made in the image of a purposeful God who created a purpose filled world. Think about the phrases we've coined around this notion. These aren't religious. These just kind of flow out of the image of God nature in all of us.

We say things like this, "Everything happens for a reason. I don't believe in coincidence. I guess it just wasn't meant to be. I guess her time had come". I mean, this is so ingrained in us. It is virtually impossible to live any other way. We just want events suffering in particular to connect to something, to connect to something purposeful. And when it's not apparent how it connects, what do we do? We go

looking. In fact, this dynamic or this tension, it actually may explain your on-ramp to faith.

Perhaps you came to faith after trying to make the narrative of life all about you. I mean, that's easy to do when we're young. We all do that. But eventually in this true, eventually you begin asking that question that, well everybody eventually asks. What's going on here? Why am I here? And if you were really dialed in, you may have added, "And why do I even care"? And why am I even asking this question? Because there was like a purpose pebble in your shoe, right? And after a while, you just couldn't ignore it any longer.

So you paused, you looked up and the next thing you knew, you believed in God. But the same dynamic, the same question of why did this happen, why did this happen to me, why did this happen to my wife, to my son, to my career, the seeming randomness of life may have signaled the end of faith for you as well. I mean like most people, you never doubted God when things were good, right? You never went searching for a purpose for your happiness. But when you got that call, when he left, when she didn't

recover, your faith never recovered either. And one day it dawned on you, "I don't believe anymore. I just don't believe it anymore".

You're not even sure exactly why and you're not sure exactly when, but perhaps you remember that afternoon or that evening when it dawned on you I don't believe anymore, which is understandable. But, and maybe this will help, the fact that you lost faith when life didn't any sense, actually underscores or highlights or serves as a reminder that there is something in you that longs for an ordered world, a purposeful world. It's what you expected. And when the world as you expected it to be fell apart, your faith and the God who was supposed to sustain a well-ordered world fell apart. But don't miss this, that longing in you, that desire, as CS Lewis refers to it, you were resistance to the notion of a meaningless existence, it's still there, isn't it? And it came from somewhere or possibly from someone.

Even without faith, even without belief in some sort of transcendent being, you continue to look for meaning and purpose, a point to all of this. Even without faith, you can't bring

yourself to embrace a worldview that only offers imaginary purpose, pitiless indifference. And perhaps, you can't embrace that kind of world view because it's not the world you live in. Your soul insists there's more. Maybe eternity resides in your heart. And so imagine this, imagine for just a moment that there is more to this life than meets the eye. That that thing in you that is not simply a residual by-product of evolution, imagine for a moment there really is a transcendent God who has his own purpose, his own plan for humanity, and that once in a while that plan intersects with your life.

And what if that plan required a disruption in your plan from time to time? What if his plan requires a disruption in our assumptions about how things should be, if God is who God says He is and has our best interests at heart? What would it look like if that good God interrupted the natural world as we know it to make himself known, in order to give us something to which we could connect our quest for purpose, a hook to hang things on, or a wall to lean things against, or a dot to connect things to? As it turns out, a handful of first century Judeans

and Galileans were convinced that that is exactly what God did. In fact, they were so convinced, they spent and risk their lives to ensure that special moment in time when God intersected with humanity that that special moment in time would be recorded for all time. Because the person and the message of Jesus was in fact for all time.

The narrative surrounding the birth of Jesus is actually a reminder that the thing in us that wants the dots to connect, is not to be ignored. It's a reminder that the world is not as random at times, as it appears. It's a reminder that there really is an overarching narrative and to which we have been invited and we have been included. A narrative that provides us with the context for our entire lives. That there is a story, but that we are not the main characters in the story. It reminds us that from time to time, the author's purpose of the story runs counter to what we want and runs counter to what we expect. But in those seemingly random moments, those unexpected interruptions, God is at work. The dots do in fact connect. There is a divine story. At Christmas, we actually celebrate the

moment in time when the author showed up in his own story. But doing so created an interruption of epic and divine proportion.

Christmas is a reminder that from time to time, God chooses to interrupt our stories as well. And that it's okay to look up and ask, "Why? What's going on? Why now? Where do I go from here? How do I fit in? Wasn't there another way"? And those questions actually reflect the fact of your faith, not a lack of faith. This is so important. There is a difference. There is a difference between questioning God and asking God a question. Luke, the gospel writer Luke, provides us with one of two birth narratives founded the new Testament. You probably knew that. Luke actually talked to everyone he could find to make sure he got the story right. But he knew if he told the entire story as it was told to him, that many people would find it difficult to believe.

So, he begins his gospel by assuring us that he's not making this stuff up, and he's not the only person trying to piece this story together. Here's how he begins his gospel. He writes this, "Many, not just me," Luke says,

"Many have undertaken to drop an account of what has been fulfilled or what has happened right here among us". The implication being, "I'm not the only person who has discovered and come to believe the story I'm about to tell you". He goes on and he writes, "With this in mind, since I myself have carefully investigated everything from the beginning, I too decided to write an orderly account for you most excellent Theopolis, so that you may know the certainty of the things that you have been taught".

Now, best we can tell, Theopolis was a first century Christian who had heard stories about Jesus, but he wanted to know the entire story of Jesus, the entire story in order. So, Luke pieces it together for him. And here's how he begins the story. In the sixth month of Elisabeth's pregnancy, Elizabeth was a relative of Mary, the mother of Jesus. We don't know exactly what their connection was. The King James version of the Bible says they were cousins, and that could be the case. In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a Virgin pledged to be married to a

man named Joseph, a descendant of David. Just another random arranged marriage that was about to experience a massive interruption that would disrupt everything.

And then Luke says, "The Virgin's name was Mary". And you knew that already, which really is amazing in and of itself. Now we don't know anything about Mary before the angel Gabriel interrupted her life. All we know is that she was planning to marry Joseph, the carpenter and lead a quiet life like her mother and her mother's mother. And she would probably live and die in the same Galilean community she grew up in, and she would just be another nameless, faceless person whose life came and went that left no Mark, no memorial, no record, no evidence that she'd ever lived. But the time had come for another chapter in the story of the redemption of the human race. A chapter that would intersect and interrupt and recap it with the stories of the people that God chose to further his story.

The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored. The Lord is with you". And of course, Mary was greatly troubled at his

words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. She didn't know if this was good news or bad news. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. You have been singled out for a purpose, that God is showing up in the story, Mary, but this will require a severe interruption in your story. Your story is you imagined that it would play out. Here's what will happen, Mary, you will conceive and give birth to a son and you are to call him Jesus. And he will be great. And he will be called the son of The Most High. And the Lord God will give him the throne of his father, David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever, and his kingdom will never end". Which is not exactly what Mary had planned, was it?

A King, a kingdom. I mean, there hadn't been an independent Jewish kingdom for like 500 years. And of course, Mary wasn't really concerned with Israel story at this point. She was most worried about and concerned about her own story. So without questioning, she asked a question. "If all this will be, how will this be"? Mary asked the angel, "since I am a Virgin". And the angel answered. "The Holy

spirit will come on you. And the power of the most high will overshadow you". Imagine how terrifying that must have sounded. "You're sure that I'm highly favored with God? You're sure I shouldn't be afraid"? The angel continues, "So the Holy one to be born will be called the Son of God".

And sure enough, that's what we call him, The Son of God. Now this all sounded so definite, as if Mary had little choice in the matter. The angel continues, "Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age. And she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month, for no word from God will ever fail". The Greek text here reads a little bit like Yoda speak. Here's what the Greek text says, "For not impossible with God is anything. For not impossible with God is anything". Perhaps not, but from Mary's perspective, everything just got a lot more complicated. Nothing in her life would be as she expected it to be.

And as you know, God had his way. Joseph married Mary as quickly as it can be arranged, but there were still rumors. For months, she

had to navigate the sideways glances in her tiny village, to hush tones when she walked by. And then a month or so before the baby was due, Caesar Augustus further complicated things by announcing a census had to be taken for the entire Roman world, and that Joseph, her husband, would have to travel to Bethlehem to register for the census. And Joseph does the math and he realizes he might miss the birth of his child. Apparently, Mary informed Joseph that he would not miss the birth because she was coming with him. And if Joseph had voiced any concern regarding her fragile condition and the fear of a miscarriage due to the harsh traveling conditions, Mary would have assured him, "Not this baby. I will have this baby". And so, they went. And while she was highly favored by God, her circumstances certainly did not reflect that.

Once again, everything seemed to be so random, so chaotic. Next thing she knows she's riding a donkey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, about a hundred miles away if you flew way longer than that by donkey. She was probably wondering about this time, "Where is that angel when I need him"? They move so slowly. As you know, by

the time they arrived there are no guestrooms available. But while they were in Bethlehem, the city of David, she in fact gave birth to a son and they named him Jesus, just as the angel instructed them. And then things go from uncomfortable to unsafe. They get word that King Herod felt so threatened by rumors of the birth of a future Jewish King, that in typical hairstyle, he unleashes a wave of terror to ensure the baby King would not survive infancy. Where is that angel?

So Joseph and Mary have to escape to Egypt about 200 miles further from home, further from family, further from normal, further from what was planned, what was expected. And then Mary gets the worst news imaginable. Herod stormtroopers went into the city of Bethlehem and the region around Bethlehem and they slaughtered every Jewish boy, two years old and under. And while I'm sure she felt some relief knowing her son was safe for the moment, Mary felt the weight of grief, knowing that it was news of her son's birth that incited Herod's rage. She would never be able to set foot inside the town of Bethlehem again.

And once again, her highly favored status made her an outcast. Was there purpose in the needless slaughter of perhaps dozens of baby boys? She'd been warned. Why not the other innocent unsuspecting fathers and mothers? How did that dot somehow connect with the purpose of God? She would never know. There's so much we will never know either. There are so many dots we will never connect, so many puzzle pieces that just don't seem to fit with the box top as we envision it. Now, Jesus grows to be a toddler and then a teenager and finally an adult. And when you read throughout the gospels, Mary seems a bit confused and concerned by her son's public behavior.

Then again, most people were. In fact at one point, you may know the story, when Jesus is an adult, she and Jesus brothers actually show up at a public gathering to try to rescue Jesus from himself. And then they try to pull him away from the crowd because he wasn't winning any friends politically or with the religious establishment. And if something didn't change... If something didn't change, things were just not gonna go well for her son turned Rabbi turned prophet, and some whisper Messiah.

Eventually, Mary, highly favored of God received the news that her son was in Jerusalem and that he'd been arrested, beaten, and taken to Pilate where the religious leaders were insisting on his execution. And she stood on the street and wept, as she watched him drag his cross to the place where Rome's enemies were crucified. She stood in the crowd and she watched him die. She watched her son die.

Why? What purpose could this possibly serve? How could this possibly be the end of the story of a life that began so miraculously? Think about it. She literally watched the worst possible thing happen to the best the person who was her son. Now, that may actually best describe the messy, unexplainable, seemingly pointless middle that you find yourself in right now. Why? Now, we know how Mary's story ended, but she didn't. In that moment, it was just another senseless, random, purposeless, Roman execution, another random act of violence. Jesus was just another Galilean who no one would remember, and Mary would just be one more brokenhearted Galileean mother who would mourn the pointless loss of her son for the rest of her life. But in a turn of events

that we rarely enjoy, a turn of events documented to give us hope.

Two and a half days later, the way we measure days, she would find herself in the presence of her risen son Savior and Lord. Her narratives was compressed in such a way that within days what made no sense made almost, almost perfect sense. Turns out there was nothing random about the painful events that had just transpired. Turns out she really was favored among women. And if Jesus can be trusted, you two are highly favored by God. So at Christmas, we're reminded that on occasion, on occasion, God interrupts the lives of men and women in order to give a push on the flywheel of his plan for the human race.

Mary wasn't the first, she wouldn't be the last. Jesus disrupted the lives of some Galilee and fishermen to ensure that his story survived the persecution and the chaos of the first century. God interrupted the life of the persecutor and chief Saul of Tarsus and recruited him to carry the message of Jesus beyond the borders of Judea and Galilee. And there would be others, some we know, some we

will never know. Men and women whose plans were interrupted so that they too could participate in the story of redemption. But the story of Christmas reminds us of something else as well. And this is so important. It reminds us that perfect faith is not faith that moves God. Perfect faith is faith that moves us to trust God when he doesn't seem to be moving, or when it doesn't seem that He's moving in the right direction, or that He's allowing things to move in the wrong direction.

The apostle Paul would come along later and he would state this idea in very theological terms here. Here's what he wrote. He wrote, "In Him in Christ, we were also chosen having been predestined according to the plan of Him who works out everything in conformity with the purpose of His will". Paul was saying, "I'm right at the epicenter of what God is doing in the world right now". And I realized there's a plan and I was invited into it and you have been invited into it. And we have the opportunity to cooperate with God and His plan and His purpose for everything.

Now, Mary would say something similar, but she stated it in very personal terms. When the angel delivered the unsettling news that her life had been permanently interrupted, Mary simply said this, "I am the Lord's servant. I am the Lord's servant. This is not what I planned. This is not what I anticipated. When I thought about my future as a mother and a wife, none of this was in the picture, but I am the Lord servant. So may it be to me, as you have said. Even though it disrupts and interrupts the future as I envisioned it". We can't help it. We were created to look for purpose in the seemingly random and disappointing circumstances of life. And sometimes we find purpose. Sometimes we find it immediately, and sometimes we find it eventually. But sometimes we don't find it at all.

And at Christmas, we're reminded that life is not as random as it seems, that there is a story going on, a divine story. And if we choose and if we believe and if we trust, we can participate. So when you find yourself praying to the very God who did not come through for you the way you wanted God to come through for you, the way you expected God to

come through for you, when your life is interrupted, you're in good company. You're in good company with Mary, the mother of Jesus, who as a teenage girl modeled the way forward for all of us when she whispered the words "I am the Lord's servant. May it be to me as you have said it". So this Christmas, remember your faith and your trust is not in vain, because your faith is not in faith. Your faith like Mary's faith, is in your risen savior who came into this world like each of us, to be one of us, to save all of us.

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