

*A sermon given on Sunday, February 7, 2010  
at St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Cleveland Heights, Ohio,  
by the Reverend Alan M. Gates, Rector*

### ***The Interrupting God***

This one is really old, but play along with me here, okay?

“Knock, Knock.” (*Who’s there?*) “The interrupting cow.” (*The interrupting co---*)  
“MOOO!”

It turns out that joke has been around so long it has websites and encyclopedia articles devoted to its analysis and its alternate variations. My favorite is “the interrupting starfish” – but you can only tell that version if you are close enough to the other person to interrupt them by sticking the spread-out fingers of your hand in their face!

All right, now try this version. “Knock, Knock.” (*Who’s there?*) “The interrupting cow.” (*The interrupting cow who?*) [...pause...] “Mooo!”

Doesn’t work at all that way, does it? And that’s the point. The meaning of the thing resides in the interruption. It is in the interruption that significance lies.

Imagine an evening in which you have supper, clean up the dishes, and settle in to enjoy relaxing and watching a film. About halfway into the movie, the phone rings. You are delighted to hear from a family member or a friend. You pause the movie, catch up on some news. If the conversation is long, it usually means that there is something meaningful being reported or shared. And of course, any long-distance relationship needs such times in order to be nourished and sustained. But meanwhile, the evening’s movie has been interrupted, and perhaps your finger is toying ambivalently with the pause button on the remote. If this phone call goes much longer, it might get too late to finish the movie! Jeepers.

Of course, as so often in life, the interruption is more important than that which was stopped. As with the Interrupting Cow, it is in the interruption that significance lies.

Our Scripture lessons today include tales of disrupted normalcy. In the Gospel reading from Luke [5:1-11], Peter and James and John are going about their business. They’ve been out all night fishing, and now they are cleaning up. But they are interrupted from their routine by this itinerant rabbi, who first asks them to sail him out a bit from the shore so he can preach to a larger crowd. And then he starts directing them on how to ply their own trade. And then, with a sign so dramatic it cannot be missed, he tells them that it’s time to change their entire vocation. Happy fisherfolk, going about their routine until, as the hymn says, the peace of God comes along to “fill their hearts brimful, and break them, too.” With the arrival of that preaching rabbi, their day is interrupted; their life is interrupted. And in the interruption significance lies.

In his First Letter to the Corinthians [15:1-11], the Apostle Paul makes reference to his own life-changing interruption. The risen Christ had appeared to all the apostles, he says, and “last of all, as to one untimely born, he appeared also to me.” There he was, this pious young man, living a life of devotion. Guarding the purity of the faith – guarding it, in fact, against some misguided sect that claimed its master had risen from the dead. And in the middle of a routine road trip to Damascus, the journey is disrupted; the young man blinded and blindsided by a heavenly news flash; and his vocation thoroughly re-defined. His journey is interrupted; his life is interrupted. And in the interruption significance lies.

Think about the number of Jesus’ miracles which take place when he himself is interrupted. The Syro-Phoenician woman and the blind beggar are healed when Jesus is waylaid

on the road. In Cana, the wine is changed to water when Jesus' enjoyment of a wedding reception is disrupted by his mother, whose interference he does not at first seem to appreciate. But perhaps Jesus learned something from those interruptions, because he tells parables in which those who refuse to allow themselves to be distracted from the task at hand miss out on God's divine invitation. "I cannot come to the banquet," they say. "I have fields to plow, commitments to keep. I will not be sidetracked!" And in one of Jesus' most familiar parables, it is not the pious priest but only the good-hearted Samaritan who embodies compassion, who stops along that roadside, side-tracked by love – willing, as he is, to have his journey interrupted.

I wonder how often you and I miss out on opportunities to be guided by God because we are unwilling or unable to be diverted from our path, to set aside the plan. Sometimes, of course, we have no choice. I read about a writer who lost the first portion of his manuscript to a computer disk failure. Forced to start with a clean slate, he found a new approach that worked much better. A woman planned a major move and career change, but fell ill and had to reverse her plans. With hindsight, it was clear that the move would not have been right at all. Such interruptions, fruitful in the end, are also unavoidable in the moment. Other times, we must allow ourselves to be diverted, be willing to go off-script.

Here, of course, a prayerful discernment is required. Some interruptions really are diversions from what God would have us do. And other interruptions are the tragedies of our lives which, while presenting opportunities for redemption and rebirth later on, are – in the event – occasions upon which grief alone is the only possible response, both natural and faithful. Still, there are, as author Blaine Smith has written,

many less severe but still aggravating interruptions that have the potential to frustrate us more than they should. ... We view them as nettlesome at best, and at worst, as ominous signs that God has turned against us. It's here that our faith usually needs to stretch a bit. Interruptions sometimes truly are serendipities in disguise. Most of us can benefit from developing greater optimism about them, and about the possibility that God will use them to our advantage. A higher expectation of God's extending help to us through interruptions not only will keep our blood pressure down when they occur, but make us more alert to the ways that [God] may be working for our benefit through the unexpected. [*Nehemiah Notes*, 5-1-04]

I myself am inclined to resent interruptions. I am inclined, as someone has said, to want to hang the Do Not Disturb sign on the door of my heart – or at least, on the pages of my calendar. I want to try to be more discerning about which interruptions to avoid, and which ones to embrace. After all, an anticipated evening's video can be discontinued to allow for a conversation that matters. An anticipated vocational move – say, from Chicago to New England! – can be derailed halfway when it turns out to be a good thing. In matters both fleeting and consequential, it is in the interruption that significance lies.

I wonder if you can identify moments in your life where the unexpected has interrupted the expected. I wonder if you can see the hand of God at work in any of these disturbances. I wonder if you will pray, with me, for the discipline to avoid trivial diversions, the grace to embrace meaningful interruptions, and the wisdom to know the difference.

"Knock, knock." (*Who's there?*) "The interrupting God." (*The interrupting God, who?*)  
Good question, ... isn't it?