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The Fourth Sunday of Advent

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Back when I was in college, I remember watching a British miniseries called *Best of Both Worlds* that has stayed with me and today offers us a way into this familiar gospel. Diane is a flight attendant who makes regular flights from Stansted to Bologna. On one flight she meets Mark, a handsome Italian architect. No reason not to live happily ever after; except it turns out Diane's already cheerfully married to restaurant manager Martin and has a young son, Jack. But architect Mark is serious about Diane and his whole Italian family loves her. Diane realizes if she's to keep Mark, she has to marry him, so in no time she finds herself with two husbands. This requires a fair bit of subterfuge, and all her best effort to pass off one husband or another as a close gay friend eventually comes to grief. The final scene of the story takes place outside a restaurant in the pouring rain. The rain epitomizes the torrential tide of reality that smashes into each character's life when the truth finally emerges. A furious and heartbroken Mark shakes his head as his body quivers in disbelief before the woman he still loves but to whom he's just realized he's legally not married. Sensing the lost hopes, family humiliation, and profound betrayal crashing down upon him, he yells, 'You have ruined my life.'

The story may be a little far-fetched but the final line certainly isn't. We invest our hearts and souls, and often our finances and reputations too, in fragile people, dubious property, precarious careers, and dangerous whims. When another person lets us down we call it betrayal; when a money deal lets us down we call it a swindle; when the economy lets us down we call it bad luck; when we let ourselves down we don't know what to call it. But what the poignant tale of the flight attendant, the architect, and the restaurant manager illustrates is that each character takes for granted that other people are objects we move around on our chessboard in order to achieve a fulfilled life. There are rules – and bigamy is clearly playing outside the rules – but everyone assumes they have a right to a successful, comfortable, well-regarded existence and anyone who takes it away has taken away an inalienable right. If a daughter emails and says, 'Dad, they say

I plagiarized my essays, they're throwing me out of college,' that existence may be in jeopardy; if a police officer knocks at the door and begins a sentence with the words, 'Madam, I have reason to believe there are category A drugs in this house,' that existence may be in deep trouble; if a phone rings and a familiar but distressed voice says, 'There's been a car accident – it's bad – it's terrible,' that existence may be changed beyond recognition. The successful, comfortable, well-regarded existence is gone, and angry, devastated people are yelling, 'You've ruined my life.'

And that's where the Christmas story begins. Joseph thinks he's got this whole thing sorted. He comes from a distinguished family – he can trace his lineage back to King David. That's as good as it gets. He's got a nice little carpentry business and he cuts a fine figure on the Nazareth chamber of commerce. He's been matched up with a fine young woman from across the village and the betrothal is all done and dusted. But then Mary says, 'Joseph, you need to know something. I'm pregnant.' The successful, comfortable, well-regarded existence is suddenly gone. Gone without trace. Gone without chance of recovery. And we can almost hear Joseph yelling at Mary, 'You've ruined my life.' Joseph had a life planned out like a wooden statue chiseled out in his carpenter's workshop. And Mary's walked right up and snapped an arm off. The statue's beyond repair. Don't insult Joseph by talking about glue, by saying all those statues in Rome have missing limbs. Don't try to make it better. It's a life-changing catastrophe. Joseph knows he's not the father – but you think anyone else's going to believe that? He's like that Italian architect raging at Diane in the pouring rain, sensing the lost hopes, family humiliation, and profound betrayal crashing down upon him, and shouting at the woman he still loves, 'You've ruined my life.'

This is how God's stories begin. Out of a place of shame, of fear, of betrayal, of anger. God calls people whose lives are a mess. Jacob's life is ruined by rivalry, deception, and cowardice. But God makes him the man from whom all Israel is descended. Jacob's son Joseph has his technicolor

dreamcoat but his life is ruined by his own bombast and his brothers' envy, and later again by the wife of Potiphar's lust and deceit. But God makes him the man to save Israel from famine. Moses is saved from the Nile by Pharaoh's daughter, yet his life is ruined when he kills an Egyptian to defend a Hebrew slave. But God raises him up to lead his people through the Red Sea to freedom. It's no different in the New Testament. Practically everyone Jesus encounters has a ruined life: parents whose children are close to death, people who've lost their sanity or place in society through leprosy or demon possession, people who've fallen into disreputable professions like prostitution or tax extortion. And the most poignant conversations Jesus has are with people like Nicodemus, who realizes that if he follows his soul and becomes a disciple of Jesus, he too will be ruined.

And once we leave the shores of the Bible and go out into the rough sea of the church's history, we see the same pattern. Think about John Newton, whose life was ruined when he was forced to join the Navy. After trying to abscond, he was given eight dozen lashes and reduced to the lowest rank. He considered murdering the captain or committing suicide. Eventually he was left marooned in West Africa. Even the ship that took him back to England two years later very nearly sank. His life was ruined a hundred ways. Yet God raised him up to become in time a leading advocate of the abolition of slavery and author of the hymn "Amazing Grace." Somehow it seems that in the moment of shame and loss and betrayal and humiliation, God's wondrous work takes root. In the ugliness and dirt and rejection of the manger, God's spark of renewal is born.

But there's more to it than that. If we go back to the story of flight attendant Diane and angry, betrayed architect Mark, it's nice to think that even though he feels in the pouring rain his life is ruined, God might yet have a future for Mark. But what's a bit more challenging to grasp is that in the story God might be suspiciously like Diane. I'm not suggesting God's a secret bigamist. But I am saying that when we stand outside a restaurant in the pouring rain yelling 'You've ruined my

life,' as often as not the one we're yelling at is God.

There's a story about a letter that was found from a person in public life to his brother. In the letter he's talking about his son who's doing well in his studies. He looked set for a military career, which could well be followed by a spell in politics and a settled family life to make his father proud. But the letter says this promising boy has gone astray. He seems to have joined some kind of a sect and he's refusing to join the army because he says he won't fight and he doesn't want to marry because there's things more important than having a family and all his values have been turned upside down. The letter's an archaeological find from the third century. It's written by a Roman senator. He's talking about his son's conversion to Christianity.

When I was a freshman I college, I found myself very disillusioned with Christianity. It didn't help that I was at a Christian college, living in a city where everyone – even the birds – was Christian with vague aspirations to become a Christian minister. I was disillusioned at how the living God could become so tamed; tamed to being some kind of cultural artifact, or even tamed to a moral code that left everyone sort of feeling some mix of self-righteous and hypocritical. I went to the chaplain of the school for a conversation and maybe a book suggestion or two. After offering a gentle and understanding ear, he went to his shelf and took down an old tattered copy of Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book *The Cost of Discipleship*. "The God of this book ruined me," he said, "and by grace He might you too." He was a very odd chaplain.

There's a sense in which God is just like Diane. We want to use God to be another object we move around our chessboard in our attempt to construct a successful, comfortable, well-regarded existence. But God's having none of it. God spoils our plans, disrupts our expectations, and turns our tidily-organized world upside down. Matthew's account tells us that Joseph resolved to divorce Mary quietly but then an angel appeared to him in a dream and told him that Mary's child has been conceived by the Holy Spirit and will be the savior. What we're not told is what Joseph replied. Can you

really imagine Joseph said, 'Ok, that's all right then – you had me worried for a moment there – right you are, carry on'? I very much doubt it. My guess is he said, 'That's all very well – but you've still ruined my life.' My guess is for most people here, your existence would have been a whole lot simpler, tidier, and more comfortable if God hadn't come into life. You know what it means to be Joseph. You know what it means to be architect Mark. You know what it means to stand in the pouring rain and stare at God and say, 'You ruined my life.'

But this brings us face to face with the heart of the gospel. God may be uncomfortably like Diane. But so are we. Because what we struggle to understand and what we need the Bible to show us every day is this: we've ruined God's life. God had it all sorted, just as much as Joseph in his tidy carpenter's workshop. God had made the sun, moon and stars. God had made human beings and the whole creation. God the architect had everything organized, just like Italian Mark had his world constructed around Diane. But then we ruined it. We wrecked God's whole big idea. We were right at the epicenter of God's dream, and we shattered it. And God must be thinking, every moment of every day, why did I ever get involved with humanity? What've human beings ever brought me but trouble? God must look at us with deep, sad eyes, and say, 'You've ruined my life.'

It's true, we have. But what does God do? God could sulk, could flip, could lash out, could destroy. But God still loves us. And so this ghastly reality, this humiliation, betrayal, shame and waste, becomes the point from which salvation arises. The God who could deal with us by remote control, the God who could love us from afar, the God that could keep us at arm's length – that God is ruined, lost, over. But see what happens. Instead we get God with us, Immanuel, God who fills our wombs and blows open our dreams, God who walks into our existence and shakes us into life. We ruined God's life, so God can no longer love us by remote control, from afar, at arm's length. God ruins our life, so we can no longer love God by remote control, from afar, at arm's length.

We all have to make Joseph's journey. We all have to stop thinking of ourselves as architect Mark in the story and realize we're Diane. We all start the story by shaking our fists at God and saying 'You've ruined my life.' But we all have to realize that we've ruined God's life. And it's out of the ruins of God's life that our salvation comes. And it's out of the ruins of our lives that we discover that a ruined life isn't the end of our story with God: it's the beginning.