

Advent's Action Plan 3: *Let it Be!*

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December 17, 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁸For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He 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 ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵The angel said to 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 holy; he will be called Son of God.

³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.

Over the course of these Sundays in Advent, we are heeding the advice of seminary professor Anna Carter Florence, to pay attention to the verbs. My friend Anna notes that when we read the Bible we get stuck on the nouns. However, understanding the nouns requires that we time-travel as to a distant land long ago and far away, because Biblical people, places and things are often not of our world. Take our reading just now. We have the house of David and house of Jacob, a virgin, an angel named Gabriel, a throne, a kingdom, a Spirit who overshadows. The nouns in this narrative are, to us by now, familiar - but admittedly - remote.

Focusing on the nouns allows us to keep our distance from the biblical text, says Anna Carter Florence, but verbs are fresh and recognizable; they meet you where you are and give you all the relevance you know what to do with. She gives an example, from Jesus' most familiar parable, writing: "You may not know what a Samaritan is but you definitely know his verbs: *came near, saw, was moved to pity, bandaged, brought, took care of, gave, paid, showed mercy.*"¹ That is why if we enter scripture verbs first it is easier to be welcomed in and find our way to understanding God's way. Read the scriptures, and it's the verbs that help us make a script for the living of our days.

So when we focus on the verbs in today's reading from Luke's gospel, the angel Gabriel takes up a lot of the action – mostly by talking non-stop. That's what angels do because they are messengers from God and therefore their primary activity beyond showing up unexpectedly is talking... delivering a message and waiting for a response. So compared to Gabriel, Mary's action in this text is relatively subdued and quiet. Her initial response to Gabriel is perplexity and pondering the meaning of his message. To which Gabriel starts talking again... *Do not be afraid, you have found favor with God. You will conceive, you will bear a son, he will be great, he will inherit the throne of David, be called the Son of God, for nothing is impossible with God.* It's quite a big message, and

¹ Anna Carter Florence, *Rehearsing Scripture*, p. 17-21.

Mary's response to this extraordinary news is the most important entrée into the meaning of this text. She says, *Here I am... let it be with me according to your word.*

Among the action verbs we are exploring over these weeks of Advent, *let it be* may appear the most passive of them all, but the whole story of the incarnation hangs on these three little words - *let it be*. This is why these words are treasured and so important to us. Biblical Scholar Raymond Brown wrote that Mary is the first and model disciple. She is the first to hear the good news of Jesus Christ, accept it and respond to it.²

Because she is the first and model disciple, Mary has been given great titles of honor through the centuries: Our Lady, Queen of Heaven, Co-Redeemer, Star of the Sea, Gate of Heaven, Refuge of Sinners, Mother of Mercy, Queen of Peace. With these honorific titles bestowed upon her through the years, and the way she has been remembered in the fine arts of painting, stained glass, sculpture and music, we have nearly deified her beyond approach. But all that has distanced her from us when the gospel actually wants to draw us near to her, when the gospel truth is she is one of us. Her response beckons our response. Let it be. God, let your will be done in me, let your life-giving ways so live in me that my life becomes holy, set apart for your purposes.

You see, what Luke wants us to notice, more than anything else is how absolutely ordinary Mary is. Mary is found in Nazareth of Galilee. Nazareth is a place of no importance by either demographics or social standards. She's simply a teenaged girl from a small town in the hill country of Galilee, and that's the point. Her role in this marvelous story is to convey this basic truth about who God is and what God cares about. No part of life is unimportant to God. No human being is unimportant to God. No square foot of real estate on the planet is below God's interest.

² Raymond Brown, *A Coming Christ in Advent*, p. 60.

No aspect of human life is beyond God's care and concern. When God decided to enter into the human family in person, God chose a vulnerable, young, perplexed and fearful teenaged girl. That is where God comes home to us.

Frederick Buechner imagined the scene this way: "Mary struck the angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he had been entrusted with the message to give her, and he gave it. He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. *You mustn't be afraid*, he said. As he said it, Gabriel only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings the angel himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a girl."³

When you think about it like that, you realize how extraordinary her response is - *Let it be*. But remember her action plan is our action plan. When God comes to us and asks us to do something to make room for the life of Jesus in our lives, or community, or world, Mary's verb is our verb. *Let it be with me*.

The news from university and college campuses has not been all good of late, with the controversies over free speech and political action, debates about curriculum, campuses being some of the hot spots of gun violence, and other forms of violence, hatred and exclusion. Add in students' anxiety over climate change and the toxicity of social media and our young adult children are feeling the brunt of all manner of social concerns. One undisputable fact is there is a mental health crisis among these young adults. Recent studies show that more than sixty percent of college students meet the criteria for at least one mental health problem.

So here is a story about how one college has tried to address these growing concerns about anxiety and depression plaguing its students.

³ Buechner, *Peculiar Treasures*.

It showed up a few months ago in *The New Yorker*, of all places, under the heading of Department of Kindness. It is, I believe, a story about how we can respond to God entering human life with our own faithful response of *Let it be*.

A few years ago, Kyle Berlin, a student at Princeton University had fairly regular meetings with his chaplain, Matthew Weiner, who is the Associate Dean of Religious Life at Princeton. He goes by Dean Matt. Together they recognized that an institution like Princeton - which values excellence, performance, efficiency, and academic competition is not a place that naturally perpetuates compassion and kindness. No wonder students are anxious and depressed. In one of their conversations, Dean Matt told Kyle Berlin, that the day before he had noticed the woman who swiped the diner's meal cards was always smiling and chatting with students as they filed by, and he thought to himself as the college chaplain, "she's doing my job." Berlin answered, "That's Catalina! She's *a hidden chaplain*. And then he named a few others – not the administrators or professors, but rather the ordinary staff persons, who in their regular encounters with students try to brighten their day. In their words, "This unwitting ministry combined elements of angelic supervision, parental nurturing and quietly glorious acts of caring."

They printed up postcards and distributed them around campus asking students: Who is your hidden chaplain? Nominations poured in and a new tradition was born to gather and recognize those dining room service providers and custodians, office personnel and members of the maintenance crew who have naturally taken an interest in the students they serve, who recognize the pressure they're under, and who do what the higher echelons of campus life can't do or don't do well enough. One of the honored hidden chaplains put it this way: You don't know what their day's been like, you don't know how they are feeling, but I like looking at people in the eyes, talking to them, that's a way of

honoring them, hoping to get a little smile. It's what I do every day, I honor people."⁴

These hidden chaplains are Christian, they're Muslim, they're Buddhist, they're agnostic. It doesn't matter. They are the bearers of what God intends by entering the human family through an ordinary teenaged girl like Mary. God knows we look up to people of power and privilege, who command respect and attention. We hold them in high regard. But you want to know who makes life livable? It is the quiet kindness of the wait staff, the custodians of eye contact and compassion, who through – what we might sum up as their “lowly estate,” become bearers of Mary's *Let it be*.

You see, through Mary God becomes human, so that we might become more God-like: kind, compassionate, caring, forgiving, peacemaking, being justice, bent on honoring others – no matter their station in life. We may never come face to face with an angel, or have to travel in order to be counted in a census, or give birth in a barn and use a manger when we're too tired to hold the newborn any longer, but Mary's primary action is defined by a verb that is our very own. *let it be*. When God comes into our life, and invites us to respond by becoming more God-like: kind, compassionate, caring, forgiving, bearing justice and peace, bent on honoring others, may Mary's *Let it be* become our *Let it be*. *Let it be in me*.

AMEN.

⁴ Nick Paumgarten, “Department of Kindness: In Plain Sight,” *The New Yorker*, May 29, 2023, p. 15.