

Mary's Let it Be
4th in Advent Series Preparing the Way

from the pulpit of
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by
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Micah 5:2-5a

²But you, O Bethlehem of Ephrathah, who are one of the little clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to rule in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days. ³Therefore he shall give them up until the time when she who is in labor has brought forth; then the rest of his kindred shall return to the people of Israel. ⁴And he shall stand and feed his flock in the strength of the Lord, in the majesty of the name of the Lord his God. And they shall live secure, for now he shall be great to the ends of the earth; ⁵and he shall be the one of peace. If the

Assyrians come into our land and tread upon our soil, we will raise against them seven shepherds and eight installed as rulers.

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.

As you can probably imagine, I am not a big fan of Saint Peter at the Pearly Gates jokes. They are usually in poor taste, not really very funny and always have terrible theology. However, I came across one in *The Christian Century* of all places in an article by an Episcopal priest that actually fits for today's scripture reading, so here it goes.

Saint Peter keeps turning people away from the gates of heaven for this or that reason, but to his dismay they keep showing up behind him, within the gates of heaven despite his best judgement. So Saint Peter goes to Jesus and complains that he has been turning the poor souls away for good reason, and then finding them within the gates of heaven none-the-less. "Oh..." Jesus says, "That's because of my Mother. She lets them in the back door." ¹

That's what mothers do, you know. And fathers too. And grandparents, O my gosh, there is no limit to the love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace that enter our lives when we have a child. For sure there are the hard times caring for them, the infractions, the fissures in relationships, the rebellions, and the deep pain of grief from time to time. But when all is said and done, most people who have ever loved a child – open the back door, suspend judgement for a while, and let grace surpass everything else. I think we have learned that from Mary. Just a young girl, her open spirit, welcoming, and at the far end of the angel's life-altering, astonishing announcement, she boldly says, "Let it be." Think of the picture we hold in our minds of this scene: Gabriel heavy-laden by huge wings; floating a few feet off the floor and Mary's startled and awe-filled response. It has been rendered so often by so many artists for such a long time, it would be impossible to peel back all the images we have in mind to get back to some real resemblance of the actual scene.

From medieval Giotto's fresco of a plain girl with gilded halo, to Raphael's Madonna clad in Renaissance brocade, to Henry Ossawa

¹ The Christian Century, 8/8/12, Suzanne Guthrie, "Journey of Light," p. 10

Tanner's cowering girl before a huge mysterious light in our city's Museum of Fine Arts, there is imbedded in our brains some composite of this scene, Mary's: "Let it Be."

Now, we Presbyterians of the Reformed Tradition have never known exactly what to do with Mary. The Roman Catholic Church has long paid her homage as the Queen of Heaven who hears their prayers of adoration, and many have sought to give her divine status. Orthodox believers venerate Mary as the Mother of God and also pray through her to Jesus. But five hundred years ago, the Reformers were concerned that excesses of devotion were heaping false honors upon Mary, and they reduced the role she plays in Protestant spirituality.

In more recent years, however, some Protestant theologians and biblical scholars have renewed an interest in Mary. One study of *Mary Through the Centuries*, by a history professor at Yale University, suggests good reason to consider Mary much more seriously today. He writes: "One of the most profound and persistent roles of the Virgin Mary in history has been her function as a bridge builder to other traditions, other cultures, other faiths."

Mary plays an important role connecting Christianity to Judaism, because Jesus' own Judaism was forever secured through his very Jewish mother. Followers, who would have tried to forget the Jewish origins of our faith, could never erase them with Mary at Jesus' side. Mary connects us to our Jewish roots. Mary also provides a bridge to Islam. Mary is one of the most important women in the Qur'an; she is numbered among the faithful who constitute the great prophetic tradition of belief. The Qur'an explicitly teaches the Virgin birth, and includes this very story of the annunciation of the angel Gabriel. Only one chapter in the Qur'an bears the name of a woman in its title, Chapter 19, entitled Maryam, her Hebrew and Arabic name."²

² Jaroslav Pelikan, excerpted in *The Living Pulpit: Mary*, Oct.-Dec., 2001, p. 36.

Mary, you see, opens the back door to heaven; she is a bridge builder among faiths and cultures, because God became human through her, and she thereby relates us to all of humankind. The child in you “will be great,” Gabriel declares, “the Son of the Most High, and of his kingdom there will be no end...” “Yes!” she said, Let it be with me according to your word.”

Hard as we might try – we cannot look back and get to an accurate historical picture of Mary with the angel Gabriel; there is too much clutter in our imaginations. And there may be too much family drama in our own experience to get back to a family we would call “holy,” but we can look around and see evidence of Mary’s “Let it be” everywhere. The human community today reverberates with her willing response to bear the Son of God. Nothing in her world view could make sense of what the angel was telling her, but when Gabriel said, “Nothing will be impossible with God,” she found herself trusting. My guess is – that if we searched our own hearts, we might be able to find Mary’s Let it be living even within us.

Serene Jones is now president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, but earlier in her career, when she was pastor of Center Church in New Haven, she tells about the very earthy reality of what Mary’s trust gave birth to. This is a congregation whose outreach ministries have brought a wide and diverse cross section of the community into its regular worship. They have a unique way of performing the Christmas story. Someone reads the account of Jesus’ birth and the whole congregation enacts it using the sanctuary as a stage. Serene Jones described it saying, “The pageant provides an occasion to experience our church at its chaotic, grace-filled best.”

A few years ago a couple of surprises in the pageant showed exactly why. Asked to play an angel, Joyce initially protested. She struggles with mental illness which has taken a toll on her self-esteem, but through the encouragement of others, she reluctantly agreed. As the heavenly host appeared to the shepherds in the fields, Joyce participated

fully in singing “Joy to the World” from the balcony. At the song’s end, Joyce turned to the woman next to her, tears in her eyes. Accustomed to seeing in Joyce’s face signs of struggle with interior voices of self-loathing, suddenly those around her saw something different. “I never knew I could be an angel,” Joyce whispered as her raiment shone.

Another surprise unfolded around the innkeeper, played by Dennis, a homeless man. Dennis was to stand in the center aisle and say no to the pregnant Mary and tired Joseph when they asked him for a place to spend the night. Dennis, however, grinning slightly, said, “Come in,” instead. This confused Mary and Joseph, and they decided to ask again. Again, he repeated his quiet welcome to the couple. “Come in.” At first, this departure from the script made people nervous. What will we do if he doesn’t give the right response? Then, looks of recognition appeared across the congregation. Dennis was not confused about his role; he understood his part very well.

Through his response, he had reminded them all of the harsh reality that this was a story of homelessness – and of the surprising “yes” that breaks through in its midst. Jones reflected later: The pageant offered us a chance to ponder what kind of community the church is.”³ And this is who we are: We are a community of Mary’s Let it be.

Mary, and the role she plays, offers us a chance to ponder what kind of community the church really is. When the world seems harsh and sad all around us, we say, “yes” to the in-breaking good news of God in our midst.

The church of Jesus Christ was planted in Gabriel’s announcement and met by Mary’s “Yes.” Mary is the first Christian because she hears the word of the Lord and accepts it as a word about herself. “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word.”

³ Serene Jones, *Feminist Theory and Christian Theology: Categories of Grace*, p. 153-154.

For Luke, in fact, Mary is the first Christian preacher. Her song which follows Gabriel's news: "My soul magnifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" is the first human proclamation of the gospel in Luke. Mary not only receives, she declares what God has done in Jesus Christ for the whole of creation. She embodies the good news she proclaims, for God has created gospel in her, and thereby God has created good news in us.⁴

Through Mary, God has given us the capacity to say "yes... Let your will be done." Yes, we believe we have new life in Christ. Yes, of his kingdom there will be no end. Yes, we will follow where he leads us into the risky places of ministering among the least and the lost and the last. Yes, we live under the banner of his grace and forgiveness. Yes, even those who have died – whom we miss at Christmas – they live with Christ forever and ever.

We know this story of Mary's "Let it be", because we ourselves have trusted that nothing is impossible with God. An insecure woman with mental illness and low self-esteem puts on a frayed white choir robe and pipe cleaner halo, and radiates uncommon purpose and serenity. A homeless man takes his part and reveals the remarkable hospitality of God to make a home in poor Mary's womb.

We have seen this positive response to God's good news in our own lives too. We see it in volunteers serving the poor and the hungry; in people purchasing toys for children they do not know; and in friends supporting the Advent Gift Market charities in honor of loved ones.

We have seen this positive response to God's good news in the transformation of our own human hearts; in our openness to welcome love and acceptance, forgiveness and grace in through the back door.

⁴ David Bartlett, excerpted in *The Living Pulpit: Mary*, Oct.-Dec., 2001, p. 28.

We see it whenever we recognize in the face of another the image of God and the likeness of Jesus.

We live this story of Mary's "Let it be" because from time to time her ready response to Gabriel's news from God has its way with us and we say, Yes...to God ourselves, and Let it be with me according to your word.

AMEN.