

Let It Be

Luke 1:26-38

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

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<sup>26</sup>In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, <sup>27</sup>to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. <sup>28</sup>And he came to her and said, "Rejoice, favored one! The Most High God is with you." <sup>29</sup>But she was troubled by the angel's words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. <sup>30</sup>The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. <sup>31</sup>And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup>He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup>He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his rule there will be no end." <sup>34</sup>Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I have not known a man intimately?" <sup>35</sup>The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit, She 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. <sup>36</sup>And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son, and this is the sixth month for her who was called barren. <sup>37</sup>For nothing will be impossible with God." <sup>38</sup>Then Mary said, "Here am I, the woman-slave of God; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel left her.

This a section of scripture and so important to our faith, not just at Christmas, but all year long. There's so much here that we could and *should* talk about that's going on between Mary and Gabriel and God.

I want to focus this morning on Mary's last phrase. After hearing all that the angel tells her—about her pregnancy, about the child's future, and about God, Mary says in response, "*let it be with me according to your word.*" Let's focus our listening on her words, "let it be."

There are a few of you out there, who immediately hear not Mary but Paul McCartney.

When I find myself in times of trouble,  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, "Let it be"  
And in my hour of darkness,  
she is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom, "Let it be"

I don't do Beatles exegesis very much, but McCartney said he wrote these lyrics after his own mother, Mary, appeared to him in a dream. Mary had died of cancer when Paul was 14 years old and he said that when she spoke these words to him, he felt her comfort. Let it be.

Maybe you hear deep peace in these words, too. When the hour is dark, what a gift to have a voice you know, a voice you trust, saying, "let it be. You do not know how this will all turn out. But you will be alright."

We all need that assurance. That we don't always have to fight. We don't have to keep up the frantic pace. We don't always have to rage against the machine. We can trust in what will be.

I also know there is a tension that lies underneath these 3 words: you and I are not always ready to just “let it be.” We are convinced that there is much to do. There are demands on you. Something is yet to be finished. A wrong must be righted. A battle is left to win. You cannot just let it be. If you don’t push and fight, it won’t turn out like it has to. I suspect all of us, in key areas of our lives, are not ready to “let it be.” Not when it comes to our children’s well-being. Not when it comes to our future. Not when it comes to the health of the environment.

If you struggle with “letting it be,” I want to honor that. I sure as heck don’t often feel like a “let it be” guy. It feels like that’s giving up our power and our agency. So what is this phrase? Is this a deeply powerful spiritual affirmation or is it passive acquiescence to the status quo? Let’s pay close attention to what Mary is saying and you can judge for yourself.

Let’s go back to the story itself in Luke, where it’s clear from the beginning that Mary is not sure she this for her life. She wasn’t first in line at the “I want to be the mother of God pageant.” The angel Gabriel tries to head-off Mary’s reluctance by buttering her up—he calls her “favored one.” Mary, to her credit, isn’t buying what he’s selling. She is troubled by the angel’s appearance. So Gabriel gets right to the point of why he is there to see her:

You have found favor with God.... You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. <sup>32</sup> He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Sovereign God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. <sup>33</sup> He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his rule there will be no end.”

This is a Bible passage that sounds good to us, but only because we are so familiar with it that we have domesticated it into lapdog that wants to be scratched behind the ears. The angel’s words are weird and disturbing. First off, there is no one living, like Mary, among the poor of Roman-occupied Palestine who could ever conceive of a king to restore the house of David and rule forever. It’s an absurd political idea—it’s a lost cause, a fool’s errand. And indeed, Jesus’ life and death at the hands of the Romans will bear that out.

Mary stays grounded in the more obvious concern: Gabriel, I’ve never had sex. If I’m pregnant and anyone finds out, I’m done. What kind of “good news” puts a woman’s life at stake?

The angel replies, “your pregnancy is by the Holy Spirit. Your cousin, Elizabeth is pregnant, too. *Nothing is impossible for God.*” The angel has made his closing argument. All that’s left is for Mary to respond.

People have debated for thousands of years whether Mary had any freedom in this moment to say “no.” Many read the power dynamics here and conclude that she could not. A recent hashtag, #MaryToo, revived a longstanding belief that Mary is subjected to a spiritualized sexual violence, her body and the arc of her life taken without her consent by God.

Mary’s response doesn’t refute that idea. “Here I am,” she says, “the slave of God” (we always say “servant” so it sounds easier on the ear). So when she says, “let it be,” it’s reasonable to

hear that line as the acquiescence of a woman who has no options. “Let it be.” Do what you are going to do.

If the story ended there, we would have to see Mary a victim. But Biblical scholar Wil Gafney writes that Mary, like Hagar before her, is not a passive vessel; she is not an incubator of the Divine life, she is “a theologian and a conversation partner” for God. It is Mary herself who understands the paradox that even though she is enslaved to God, the child she will bear will make people free. By the time she arrives at Elizabeth’s house, she is singing:

“My soul magnifies the Lord,  
<sup>47</sup> and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,  
<sup>48</sup> God has looked with favor on the lowliest servant.  
Surely all generations will call me blessed,  
<sup>49</sup> for the Mighty One has done great things for me,  
<sup>52</sup> God has brought down the powerful from their thrones  
and lifted up the lowly;  
<sup>53</sup> God has filled the hungry with good things  
and sent the rich away empty.

Mary—not Gabriel—declares this in song about herself. Mary sees and knows who God is. It’s as though she says, “OK God, if you’re going to take my body, but here’s my plan for how this is all going to go. This is how I plan to raise this child: he will be the one the prophets dreamed about. He will be the one who makes wrongs right, the one who marries justice to peace, the one who wipes every tear from every eye. That’s who I plan for him to be. That what I will sing to him when he’s in this womb of mine. That’s how I will raise him. Because that, God, is who I believe that you are. So God,” Mary seems to say, “you better be all in with me and my child.”

Mary takes her agency back. She’s not an object, but one of the great subjects in our Holy Story. Mary bears, and nurses, and protects, and teaches the child. Mary follows him, and cares for him. Mary sees him grow into himself and his identity. Mary sees her son betrayed and Mary watches him die. Is she also there gathering spices on the Resurrection morning? Did she touch him, like Thomas? Tradition says she there with the disciples when on the day of Pentecost and became one of the great leaders in the early church.

This human being had her whole existence taken over by God. It was a situation that she could not control. But she did not just acquiesce. She responded, saying, “God, if you’re going to use my life in this way, I expect the best you’ve got. I want all the love that you can muster to be with me and with this child. Let my life and the life of my child be truly for the good of all of us.

Yes, God uses Mary. But Mary is not used. She is God’s partner. In her response to the angel’s announcement, Mary tells God to be God. Does she even use God own words in her response? For remember God created all things—light and laughter and love and life, with the words, “Let there be....” Mary, recalling God’s goodness, declares “Let it be with me according to your word.”