

Isaiah 9:2-7

Luke 1:26-38

December 24, 2017

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

LET IT BE

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

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

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom
Let it be

In March 1970, the Beatles released their final single record, “Let It Be,” just before Paul McCartney announced he was leaving the band. The *Let It Be* album was released a couple of months later after the break-up of the Beatles.

Have you ever wondered who “Mother Mary” is in “Let It Be”? After hearing about Mary telling the angel Gabriel, “Let it be with me according to your word,” you might think Paul McCartney was singing about the Virgin Mary. When asked if that is the case, Paul has typically answered by telling his fans they can interpret the song however they want.¹

Actually, Mother Mary refers to Paul’s mother, who died when he was 14. He talks about how his life was not going well when he realized the Beatles were on the verge of breaking up. Here’s how he describes what happened: “One night, somewhere between deep sleep and insomnia, I had the most comforting dream about my mother who died when I was only 14. She had been a nurse, my mum, and very hardworking, because she wanted the best for us. We weren’t a well-off family — we didn’t have a car, we just about had a television — so both of my parents went out to work, and mum contributed a good half to the family income. At night when she came home, she would cook, so we didn’t have a lot of time with each other. But she was just a very comforting presence in my life. And when she died, one of the difficulties I had, as the years went by, was that I couldn’t recall her face so easily. So in this dream 12 years later, my mother appeared, and there was her face, completely clear, particularly her eyes, and

she said to me very gently, very reassuringly, ‘Let it be.’ It was lovely. I woke up with a great feeling. It was really like she had visited me at this very difficult point in my life and gave me this message. Be gentle, don’t fight things, just try and go with the flow and it all will work out.”²

We Protestants typically don’t pay much attention to Mother Mary, except at this time of year. Then we dress her in a light blue robe with a white shawl over her head. We picture her as quiet and assuming. But she must have been one tough woman — before, during, and after her pregnancy. In light of today’s gospel reading, what words of wisdom does Mother Mary speak to us on this fourth Sunday of Advent on Christmas Eve?

My article that appeared in Wednesday’s *Duplin Times* originally came to mind as part of today’s sermon. If you read the article on Wednesday, bear with me. Ten days ago Dr. Joell blessed us with her rendition of “Mary, Did You Know?” accompanied by Vera on the piano. I don’t remember hearing that song before I moved to Wallace almost twenty years ago, but it has become one of my favorite Christmas songs. Perhaps you already know that Wallace’s own Michael English originally recorded the song on his debut album in 1991.

Some critics complain that, of course, Mary knew what she was getting into, so why write a song asking that question? However, it’s worth thinking about what Mary did and didn’t know when the angel Gabriel delivered his unsettling message. The song asks, “Mary, did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water, save our sons and daughters, soon deliver you, give sight to a blind man, calm a storm with his hand? Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation, will one day rule the nations, is heaven’s perfect Lamb?”

Maybe Mary didn’t know all of that about her baby boy, either when the angel announced what was going to happen or when she delivered her first-born child. However, as Jesus grew, and especially as he began his ministry, Mary must have come to know that what Jesus said and did, who he was and how he lived, would bring him into conflict with the powers-that-be. But could she have known it would lead to his death on a cross?

Let’s return to when Mary first heard the angel’s announcement. We can imagine what Mary did know at that moment. She knew if she said yes, she was opening herself to gossip and dirty looks and scorn in her town. She knew her life would never be the same. She knew she would have to have a very difficult conversation with her parents and Joseph, her fiancé. She knew she risked her honor, not to mention her life. Mary already knew a lot that day as she considered how to answer the angel’s announcement of what God was doing in her life. But, despite what Mary probably already knew that day, and what she might not have known for another thirty years, Mary said yes to God. She said yes to God, because Mary also knew God is faithful to his promises. Mary knew what God had done for his people in the past. Mary knew she could trust God for her future. Mother Mary said, “Let it be.”

“Let it be . . .” Depending on your tone of voice, attitude, and body language, that could be nothing more than throwing in the towel. After all, what can you do? Really, what was Mary supposed to do when the angel of the Lord appeared to her and gave

her the perplexing news that she was going to have a baby, when all of the circumstances of her life were wrong for such a greeting? But we can also hear Mother Mary speaking words of wisdom when she says “Let it be” when all of the circumstances of her life were wrong for such news — at least from this world’s point of view.

At the risk of going all “Greek geeky” on you this morning, let me share with you the grammar of “Let it be.” Those three English words are expressed in one Greek word that is written in what is called the “optative mood.” There are fewer than 70 instances of the optative mood in the New Testament, and almost half of them express a negative thought, something like, “May it never happen!”

Mary’s “Let it be” is an example of what is called the “voluntative optative.” Right there you get a clue to the significance of Mary’s willing response to Gabriel’s unexpected and perplexing greeting and news about her potential pregnancy. The optative mood typically expresses a wish or a prayer, but not really with any sense of uncertainty or doubt on the part of the person doing the wishing or praying.

I found something very interesting about the development of the “voluntative optative” in one of my Greek grammars: “it is largely a carry-over from [ancient Greek] even though its meaning has changed . . . due to a *change in theological perspective*. Prayers offered to the semi-gods of ancient Athens could expect to be haggled over, rebuffed, and left unanswered. But the God of the NT was bigger than that. The prayers offered to him depend on his sovereignty and goodness. Thus, although the *form* of much prayer language in the NT has the tinge of remote possibility, when it is offered to the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead, its *meaning* often moves into the realm of expectation. If uncertainty is part of the package, it is not due to questions of God’s ability, but simply to the petitioner’s humility before the transcendent one.”³

Mother Mary’s words of wisdom, “Let it be,” call us to consider what we think about how God works in our lives and in our world today. I don’t know if any of us has ever received news as unsettling and perplexing as the news Gabriel announced to Mary. But, since God is true to himself and to his ways, we shouldn’t be surprised if and when God confronts us with unsettling and perplexing challenges and callings and opportunities. The question is, how will we answer? Will we ignore God’s call in our lives, or will we respond with our own version of “Let it be”?

In March 2016, Ann Weems died in St. Louis, MO. She was a Presbyterian elder who published seven books of poems meant to be used in worship and personal devotions. At Christmas a number of years ago, my mom gave me and Nancy a copy of one of Ann Weems’ best known books, *Kneeling in Bethlehem*. I find myself pulling that book off my shelf every Advent and re-reading some of her poems about Advent and Christmas.

The first poem in the section called “The Birth” is “Mary, Nazareth Girl.” It reads like this:

Mary,
Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?
What did you know of men
when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
you, barely out of childhood yourself?
God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God
that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
waiting
listening
for the footsteps
of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
if we have the faith to listen?⁴

Mary's words of wisdom to us on this fourth Sunday of Advent, on Christmas Eve, are "Let it be . . ." Not "Let it be, whatever may be may be," but "Let it be to me according to your word." Mary's words of wisdom to us, "Let it be," encourage us to surrender to God's call in our lives, even when the circumstances of our lives and of God's call don't seem to be particularly promising. Mary's words of wisdom to us, "Let it be," are an affirmation of faith we can share. As Ann Weems asks, "Could it be there are messages for us if we have the faith to listen?"

As I worked on this sermon I read an interesting article called "The Pause Before Yes." At the end of the article, Debie Thomas reflects on what happened after the angel Gabriel departed from Mary. She writes, "It's the moment when the prayer ends, the vision recedes, the certainty wavers. It's the moment after the 'yes,' the moment when the mountaintop experience fades into memory, and life in the valley begins. How different Mary's experience might have been if Gabriel had stuck around to erase her doubts and silence her critics. But no, he departed, leaving the ongoing work of discernment and discipleship to Mary alone. Her 'yes' didn't signal the end of mystery. Mystery had only begun." Debie Thomas refers to the song "Mary, Did You Know?" and comments, "We have no way of knowing what Mary knew. My guess is that like us, she knew just enough to get started."⁵

Words of wisdom for this Advent/Christmas season, and for every day — "Let it be . . . Let it be to me according to your Word." Let us listen for God's messages to us. Even if we only know enough to get started on whatever it is God is calling us to do, may we find the strength and courage and assurance to speak our own words of wisdom, "Let it be . . ."

Let us pray: Most High God, for you nothing is impossible. Through a poor young woman in a small town you gave birth to our Savior. By your Holy Spirit, fill us with new life and hope. Overshadow us with your power and grace so that we, like Mary, might be your servants, bearing witness to the promise of your Word; through Jesus Christ, who is coming to reign. Amen.

NOTES

¹ “Let It Be (Song)” at www.en.wikipedia.org.

² “Who is Mother Mary in McCartney’s Let It Be?” Entertainment News, The Philippine Star at www.philstar.com.

³Daniel B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar, Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 480-481.

⁴Ann Weems, “Mary, Nazareth Girl,” in *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 25.

⁵Debie Thomas, “The Pause Before Yes,” at Journey With Jesus at www.journeywithjesus.net.