

Let it be with me
Jubilee Mennonite Church
December 17, 2017

Message: We are invited into God's will with joy despite the challenges that life presents.

Purpose: To remind ourselves of the ways of God in the midst of all of life.

Scripture: Luke 1:26-38 (I will read); Other texts can be referenced, but need not be read: Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11; Psalm 126, 1 Thessalonians 5:16-24; John 1:6-8; 19-28

Synopsis: There are times where we just are not ready for what life throws at us. Opportunities come and go and demands appear before us in ways that makes us want, in all honesty to run and hide. Sometimes these opportunities are wonders of the working of God in our lives; other times they can seem like a cruel joke intended to make life that much more complex and that much more impossible. Ascribing these happenings to God is equally problematic. Yet, even when we are confronted with the most unlikely of circumstances, we are invited into what God is doing in our midst, discerning what God might be up to. May we have the courage like Mary to reply with openness and hope.

Luke 1:26-38 ²⁶ In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷ to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸ And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰ The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹ And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³² He 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. ³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." ³⁴ Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" ³⁵ The 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. ³⁶ And 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. ³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God." ³⁸ Then 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.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶ In the sixth month
the angel Gabriel was sent by God
to a town in Galilee called Nazareth,

²⁷ to a young woman engaged to a man
whose name was Joseph,
of the house of David.

The woman's name was Mary. ²⁸

And Gabriel came to her and said,

"Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."

²⁹ But she was much perplexed by his words
and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

³⁰ The angel said to her,
"Do not be afraid, Mary,
for you have found favor with God.

³¹ And now,
you will conceive in your womb and bear a son,
and you will name him Jesus.

³² He will be great,
and will be called the Son of the Most High,
and YHWH will give to him
the throne of his ancestor David.

³³ He will reign over the house of Jacob forever,
and of his kingdom there will be no end."

³⁴ Mary said to the angel,
"How can this be, since I am a virgin?"

³⁵ The 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.

³⁶ And 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.

³⁷ For nothing will be impossible with God."

³⁸ Then 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.

Our Christmas stories have a particular shade to them. There is something of the holy glow about them as special people do extraordinary things in extraordinary circumstances. Even we outside the saint traditions hold these stories much in the way that we are accustomed to hearing them read; in a passive, matter of fact, accepting voice that expresses no sense of surprise, doubt, or wonder what so ever. But when you think about it, there is little chance of that being anywhere close to the case. When it comes to shocking experiences, one must imagine that encountering an angel of YHWH God is right up there. There you are, minding your own business, when out of nowhere appears the messenger of YHWH. No Warming. No Shimmering lights like a movie flashback, or heralding trumpets. Just “Greetings favored one”. In my mind’s eye this is where I insert a spit take—you know the slapstick move of someone hearing something while taking a drink. But instead we are given Luke’s passive “She wondered what sort of greeting this was.” Perhaps he was limited for scroll space, because I cannot help but assume that here left out some of the important bits here like “Gah! Don’t sneak up on me like that!” and “Holy Cow, you are an angel! An Angel of the Lord. An Angel of the Lord is sitting on the table speaking to me. And don’t pretend that saying ‘Do not be afraid’ somehow makes this better.” “Perplexing” doesn’t quite do the thing justice, I dare say. There is a reason why we have so many names for God. The manifestations of the creator of the universe are not to be taken lightly, and the consequences for even saying the name of God were so consequential that a whole ritual for dealing with holy objects blessed accidentally by the mere articulation of the name is spelled out in the rabbinical code. So, when even the name of God carries such consequence, an actual messenger of the most high popping in on you is definitely something that would be perplexing. You may not know exactly what is going on, but you know with certainty that your life as you once knew is now officially altered.

We stick with the way we read Mary meek and mild because that is our way of bringing the bible into our sane, sanitary view of how the world should be. We have this notion that the people of the Bible are the saints we have made them out to be. They never speak out of turn. They aren’t surprised in the least by the indescribable. They ponder the completely incomprehensible with meek acceptance, and a fully formed notion of what things look like on the other side. It goes against the grain to consider that their world was in the least bit like ours, or their inclinations might at all be close to our own. It is part of our defense mechanism. If we

keep the Mary's of the world sanctified and out of reach, then we think that God could never, would never contemplate doing something even a 100th so bold in our own lives. I think it is our own psychology to keep the Angels well away from our lives, our plans, our world. That was then. That was the Holy Them. They cannot be like us, because we can barely conceive of God behaving like this in the first place, let alone entertain the possibility that this have anything to do with real, human emotion or anything close to the world we know.

But this announcement had every hallmark of bad news for Mary. "You are going to conceive by the Holy Spirit (when you are not even married) and you are going to bear a son. And that Son will take up the throne of the greatest king of Israel and be called the Son of God." To Mary, this is more than a bit of tight spot, offering complications and problems on so many different levels, starting with the expectations of the purity laws which would be the death of her for becoming pregnant outside the wedding covenant, all the way to the not small task of giving birth to the very son of the living, holy God. This is not the world as it should be. This is not good news for Mary, nor the way that life is supposed to work at all. We do Mary a disservice, not to mention ourselves, not to allow her even a moment's pause in what she is contemplating here.

What makes Mary remarkable at this and so many junctures is not the fact, I submit, that she takes on this news with meek acceptance without a moments pause. I think she was visited with all the shock, doubt, disbelief, fear, incomprehension and absolute dumb-founded unbelief that is the hallmark of we mortals. I am not sure we can even really comprehend what she is going through her. But what makes Mary Mary is not the absence of these things; it is her ability to feel them and to still find a way to say yes. Mary says yes to God and that makes all the difference. She signs up for all this amazing, wonderful, scary possibility that was laid out before her. She chooses to believe at the end of it all that indeed there is nothing that is impossible for God, even such an amazing work in someone as normal and ordinary as her; the wrong person, in the wrong relationship, in the wrong place, with the wrong political situation. She says yes. I firmly believe that the core of Love, especially God's love is always allowing the other to say no without threatening the present care you have for the person; I think that there was a possibility for her to say no. It's entertaining to think that perhaps this was take 6 for the Angel... God wanted to come and be with God's people, to fulfill all the promises to which

Israel had clung to for so long, and God was asking her, Mary, to be part of it. And she finds the courage to open herself to what God is doing even in this most scary, unlikely fashion.

This is important because I think it speaks to us in ways we may not be entirely comfortable with. There is much in our world that seems beyond us, beyond our hope, beyond even God's ability to change or act within. There is much here to fear, to shrink back from, to walk away from. We are not always sure where God is working in our world, whether God is at work in what we see, or how we are involved in what God is doing, even if we want to be involved in what God is doing in the midst of so much trouble. We look for hope, for the herald of something new, something different, something springing up within the barren landscape that we see all around us. We wonder where we might see God with us, Immanuel, in this time and place. We might be ever so slightly afraid that the next angel just might have a message for us, might invite us into that which we don't understand, and are not entirely convinced will work out in the end.

Mary said yes, and that started it all. It brings Immanuel; God with us into the world to change the world forever more. In many ways, God has never stopped asking to come into the world. Immanuel draws close, God says, the one who I sent to model how I want to be with my people not as an abstracted idea to be put on a shelf or only talked about as a protection against cosmic disaster, but how I want to be with all people by being known in you and through you. We are given this invitation to incarnation in the midst of the pain that we feel and that we see around us so readily, in the midst of the doubt we know, in the midst of the questions that we have, in the midst of the uncertainty that we feel. We are called like Mary to the awesome, frightening, joyful, hopeful task of declaring that God's Immanuel has come and is coming, recognizing that whatever we do, wherever we go, whatever the system, the power, the impossibility, God is at work, and God will turn things around and we have the privilege to play our part in that work.

Do we always respond as confidently, certainly, or faithfully as we might wish? Of course not. But that does not change the fact of the invitation, one that is offered each and every day. We are invited to say yes, to become part of what God is doing in our world. This is not an act of logic. This is not an act of self interest or self improvement. This is not an act that will solve all the problems and soothe all our doubts. This is an act of faith, an act of vision, an act of hope,

of embracing yet again the promise of God's changing and challenging way revealed through the one who came to show us the way God walks with us in the big times and the small. Immanuel has come. Immanuel is coming. May we each be given the grace to each in our own ways respond to the model and the call of God with us saying "Let it be with me according to God's will."

Confession

O God of blessing and joy,
 your favor rests upon us, and our souls magnify you.
We sing of your steadfast love
 and proclaim your faithfulness.
We confess we often lack complete trust,
 walking in our own strength, building our own houses
 instead of joining you in turning ruins into abundance.
We are terrified and overcome by fear,
 wondering, "How will we know?"
 and pondering, "How can this be?"
We are afraid to claim and proclaim that nothing is impossible
 when your power overshadows us,
 when your Spirit comes upon us.
We find it hard to let go and say,
 "Here I am, the servant of the Lord;
 let it be with me according to your word."
Forgive us.
(pause for silence)

Words of assurance

O God, Emmanuel,
 in Jesus, the Christ, you have come among us.
 You have given us life, and we are restored.

Thomas Merton, 20th century

"You do not need to know precisely what is happening, or exactly where it is all going. What you need is to recognize the possibilities and challenges offered by the present moment, and to embrace them with courage, faith and hope."

M. Scott Peck, 20th century

"The truth is that our finest moments are most likely to occur when we are feeling deeply uncomfortable, unhappy, or unfulfilled. For it is only in such moments, propelled by our discomfort, that we are likely to step out of our ruts and start searching for different ways or truer answers."

George Harrison, 20th century

"With every mistake, we must surely be learning."

French proverb

"Hope is the dream of a soul awake."

Oscar Wilde, 19th century

"We are all in the gutter, but some of us are looking at the stars."

Latin proverb

"Dum spiro, spero: While I breath, I hope."

Barbara Kingsolver, Animal Dreams, 20th century

"The very least you can do in your life is figure out what you hope for. And the most you can do is live inside that hope. Not admire it from a distance but live right in it, under its roof."