

Dec. 21, 2014  
Luke 1:26-38  
First Parish UCC, Brunswick, ME  
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## *Let It Be*

### *INTRO TO SCRIPTURE*

Coming to the awareness that you are 'with child' is a very powerful experience for a woman, whether it is good news or not. In today's scripture, often called the Annunciation, we will hear the angel Gabriel's proclamation of that news to Mary. There are a couple of things that might reframe our hearing of that news. One is linguistic and the other is cultural.

The linguistic factor is the word "virgin." Throughout western Christian tradition there has been a lot of focus on Mary's sexual purity, a sentiment often conveyed through this word. First of all, we need to note of course that this focus has come through the writings of men. In addition, the choice of the word itself is somewhat suspect. Its roots are in the Latin translation of the prophet Isaiah's hope that a "young woman" will bear a son who will save the people Israel. In Hebrew the word was "young woman," but those who translated it into Latin chose a word that means "virgin." And it has been carried on in the tradition as "virgin."

The cultural factor relates to our understanding of the relationship of an engaged couple. We often present Mary as being terrified because she is an "unwed mother." Strictly speaking she was not yet married, but she and Joseph were betrothed. In those days it was not strictly forbidden for such couples to be physically intimate. Recently I read the

comments of one rabbi who said that Mary and Joseph's families most likely would have been very pleased at the news of the baby because it was a sign of a "fruitful" marriage. In a day when having children was essential, this puts a whole different perspective on this story.

### *SERMON*

This year our theme is "Being a Blessing." So when I first turned to today's passage Mary's words, "Let it be with me according to your word," jumped out for me. "Let it be." For someone of my generation it didn't take long to get to the Beatles' song "Let it Be."

In our family the primary story about the song "Let it Be" has to do with my father. As many of you know he was a high school teacher. One year in the

early 70s, when this song first came out, he was assigned the responsibility to be the senior class advisor at his school. His basic stance with the students was, "It's your graduation." They took him seriously and decided they wanted to process into graduation to the music of "Let it Be" instead of the usual pomp and circumstance. My father said sure. The students loved it. You probably won't be surprised, however, to hear that the administration wasn't quite so pleased. Needless to say my father never had to be senior class advisor again. But that class had a graduation they still remember.

Paul McCartney, who wrote this song, said the inspiration came from a dream encounter with his mother, Mary. Visions in the night - of one kind or another- can be very powerful. Paul's mother had died when he was only fourteen years old. At the time of the dream his life with the Beatles was very stressful. He was distressed. He said of the dream,

*It was great to visit with her again.  
I felt very blessed to have that dream.  
It got me writing, "Let it Be." .. She said  
to me, "It will be alright, just let it be."*

So the song begins "when I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me." When McCartney has been asked over the years about the connection of this song to the Mother Mary of Christian tradition, he has said that he leaves interpretation up to the listener. He's obviously a smart businessman and a wise artist. Needless to say this song

reverberates at many levels for many people.

We all find ourselves in times of trouble. In such times what does it mean to "let it be?" Does it mean to just accept whatever is happening? Just because something has happened does it mean that it's God's will?

Mary, Mother of Jesus, doesn't just say "let it be." She says, "Let it be with me according to thy word." Mary reminds us that we need the wisdom to discern what is God's word, God's hope, in the midst of whatever is happening. Sometimes that means accepting and sometimes it means working for change.

The Serenity Prayer puts it well,  
*God grant me the serenity to accept  
the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

First century Palestine was a dangerous time and place to have a baby, especially if you were Jewish. All was not well with the world. The Romans were often murderous toward the Jews, as is depicted in Matthew's Christmas story where Mary and Joseph flee Bethlehem because Herod has ordered the slaughter of the innocents.

Such tactics are still among us as we saw this past week with the horrendous killing of dozens of school children in Pakistan. One person speaking out about this slaughter is Pakistani Malala Yousafzai,

herself a victim of Taliban violence. As you may remember she was targeted for assassination because of her vocal support of and participation in women's education. The Taliban tracked her down on her bus and shot her. Amazingly she survived and her voice has become even stronger.

I do not believe it was God's will or God's plan for Malala to be shot. However, she has taken her experience and let it be a witness to injustice. She cannot change what has happened to her but she has decided to use it for change. She refuses to be quiet. She is a voice crying in the wilderness with a hope for peace and education for all. For that she received the Nobel Peace Prize, the youngest person ever to receive this recognition.

Malala is an unlikely heroine. She is young. She is culturally powerless. She is physically wounded. Yet she is astonishingly powerful in her witness. It is through her wounded being that she has become a blessing to so many. She has given birth to a renewed world-wide commitment to education in general and to education for girls in particular.

Mary of Nazareth was an unlikely heroine. She was young. She was culturally powerless. She was physically transformed by the child in her womb. Yet she is astonishing powerful in her witness. Even though she has no idea what lies ahead, she consents to use her very being as a blessing to life itself, proclaiming, "Let it be with me according

to thy word." She is willing to let what is of God work through her.

It seems to me that both of these young women live out "letting it be" in the manner of the Serenity Prayer.

*God grant me the serenity to accept  
the things I cannot change,  
the courage to change the things I can,  
and the wisdom to know the difference.*

Ah, it is that kind of wisdom we seek - words of wisdom seeping deep within us, emboldening us for the living of these days.

These two women are remarkable. By contrast, our lives seem much more ordinary. For instance it is unlikely that any of us will be written about in holy scripture or receive the Nobel Peace Prize.

Yet the basic thing that is asked of them is asked of us - to be a blessing. To know that our very being - in its vulnerability, even in its brokenness - can be an angel (a messenger) of change and transformation in the world.

Sometimes we are called to big things but sometimes it's just day to day living that needs our attention. So let's get down to basics. I suspect for many of us our biggest vulnerability at this moment is exhaustion. We're down to those last days - trying to do too much in preparation for Christmas. In these days it's easy to lose sight of the central

proclamation of Christmas – that Being is a Blessing. The Word made flesh. It is our very being that is meant to be a blessing to those around us and to life itself.

In the New Zealand Prayer Book there is a *Night Prayer*, which has good advice for us this day.

*What has been done has been done.  
What has not been done has not been done. Let it be.*

May we let ourselves be.