“Let It Be”

The Rev. Dr. Pete James
December 15, 2013
Luke 1:26-38
“Let It Be”

Can I trust God when life doesn’t make sense? How is it possible to put my faith in God when life’s circumstances confound me?

Thus far in this Advent we’ve considered Jesus as Son of David and Son of Man. Today, our focus is Jesus as the Son of Mary.

There is a division of the house with regard to Mary in the Christian church. Catholics revere Mary and pray to her. Protestants pretty much ignore her; no doubt in reaction to what is perceived as excess veneration given to Mary among Catholics.

One story will dramatize the difference. John Knox was a Protestant reformer who was instrumental in bringing The Reformation to Scotland. There was considerable bad blood between Catholics and Protestants in the 16th century. Knox was arrested for propagating Protestant teaching and sentenced to 19 months of hard labor as a rower in a galley ship. One day a Catholic priest came on board and brought a painted wooden statue of Mary with him. Each sailor was expected to genuflect before the statue and show proper respect. Knox resisted, “Trouble me not; such an idol is a curse. I will not touch it.” When the statue was thrust into Knox’s hands, he promptly threw it overboard exclaiming, “Let the Lady save herself…Let her learn to swim.”

It was not a high watermark in Protestant-Catholic relations! Does Mary have a place in Protestant theology or will we like Knox continue to throw her overboard?

It doesn’t help matters that the popular image of Mary in religious art is hyperpious. Nearly every painting and figurine portrays Mary with hands folded and a serene countenance, looking every bit the part of a gentle nun. Let me tell you, Mary is one gutsy lady. She calls upon God in her song called the Magnificat, in Luke 1, to cast down the mighty from their thrones and exalt the humble (Luke 1:51-53).

What do we know about Mary from the Bible? We know her to be a poor peasant girl; no more than 16 years old. She hails from a town so insignificant that it goes unmentioned in the annals of the Old Testament. We’re also told she is engaged to a man called Joseph. He’s a decent, honorable man, but nobody special.
One day, an angel named Gabriel visits Mary, *Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you* (Luke 1:28). This verse in Catholic tradition is translated, *Hail, Mary, full of grace and truth*, and features prominently in Catholic worship liturgy. Catholics contend there is something virtuous in Mary that warrants God’s favor. Protestants believe the favor is largely on God’s account.

At the very least, I suspect God recognizes something in Mary that He can work with. She is willing to trust God even when life doesn’t make sense to her.

“Hail Mary” has been a permanent fixture of our football lexicon since 1975. The Dallas Cowboys were playing the Minnesota Vikings in a playoff game. Dallas quarterback Roger Staubach stood at midfield with seconds left on the clock and his team trailing by four points. He launched a 50-yard pass to his receiver Drew Pearson, who was left unguarded when a defender fell down in the play. Pearson caught the pass and walked into the end zone, winning the game for the Cowboys. Afterwards, Staubach, a practicing Catholic, was asked about the play. He told reporters, “I just closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary.” Ever since that game, a desperation pass thrown near the end of a game has become synonymous with a Hail Mary. I suspect more people today know more about a Hail Mary pass than a Hail Mary prayer.

Mary is understandably troubled by what this angel might have up his sleeve. Gabriel senses her unease and offers these reassuring words, *Don’t be afraid, Mary. You have found favor with God. You will be with child and will give birth to a son. You are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever* (1:30-33).

Mary remains confused as she gives voice to the obvious, *How can this be since I am a virgin* (1:34). *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, Gabriel announces, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you* (1:35). God will somehow make it happen.

People ask whether I believe in the virgin birth. The two seminal events in Jesus life—the virgin birth and the empty tomb—are justified as acts of God’s improbable intervention. Gabriel supplies the perfect explanation for this miraculous birth, *Nothing will be impossible with God* (1:37).
What Mary says next goes down in the annals of Biblical history as one of the most faith-filled fiats every uttered, *Let it be to me according to your Word*. Mary is willing to trust the angel’s promise even when the circumstances make no sense.

The words “Let it be” take me back to the sound track of the Beatles 12th and final studio album by the same name. For years, I assumed the words of the song, “When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be” was a reference to Jesus’ mother, Mary. But Paul McCartney, the originator of the song, tells a much different story. It was 1970, the year the Beatles separated as a band. After a tense night in the recording studio, McCartney dreamed that his deceased mother (also named Mary) appeared to him. She had died of cancer when he was 14. She said to Paul in his dream, “It will be all right. Just let it be.”

What Mary expresses in her exchange with Gabriel is no mere go with the flow sort of attitude. She’s willing to take God at His word, even when it doesn’t make sense.

Put yourself in Mary’s sandals. An angel announces that you will bear a son without benefit of a human father. This son born to you will be the long-awaited Messiah. Try to get your head around this staggering pronouncement! This is no mere “chill and let things happen” sort of moment. Mary is faced with the choice: can she trust God when the circumstances of her life don’t make sense?

God declares in Isaiah, *My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are my ways your ways. As the heavens are high above the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts higher than your thoughts* (Isaiah 55:8-9). Perhaps this is God’s way of saying, ‘I’d explain it to you if I could, but you wouldn’t understand. Let’s just say that it’s complicated.’

The book of Job serves as a classic case study in Scripture on why God doesn’t always explain things to people. Job has everything going for him when his life suddenly goes south and his friends desert him. Job believes God owes him some sort of explanation. I like what Frederick Buechner writes in his book *Wishful Thinking*, “For God to explain the kind of things Job wants explained would be like trying to explain Einstein to a little neck clam.” How do you explain Einstein’s theory of relativity to creatures who don’t know the first thing about physics and atoms? Could it be that God doesn’t reveal his grand design to Job because he’s incapable of comprehending the answer? Philip Yancey writes in his book *Disappointment with God*, “We remain ignorant of many details, not because God enjoys keeping us in the dark, but because we don’t have the faculties to absorb so much light.”
God deflects questions of cause and effect to focus instead on our response. This is where Mary’s response, “Let it be to me according to your word” comes back into play. We’ve come at long last to the so-what portion of this sermon. So what difference does Mary’s story make in my life?

There are times when the circumstances of our lives don’t make sense. Like you, I wrestle with the seeming inequities of life. Why does the way of the wicked prosper and why do the good die young? How is it possible that deadbeat parents are able to conceive while would-be earnest parents remain infertile? Why does life seem so unfair? Why is there so much suffering in the world?

Not only do the circumstances of our lives not make sense, but sometimes the people in our lives defy description also. Some people I just don’t get. Why do they react the way they do? What makes them tick? Why do human relationships have to be this complicated?

Mary’s life epitomizes trust. She knows God’s word as reliable. Her experience of God in her young life has already validated that God’s Word can be trusted. Let me tell you, this young peasant girl knows her Torah. She quotes no less than ten Old Testament passages within a span of ten verses in her Magnificat. She knows that the promise God made to an infertile couple named Abraham and Sarah that they will someday have descendants as numerous as the stars of the sky—is a promise that can be trusted (Genesis 22:17). She knows that God’s promise made to David, a king-in-waiting on the run from Saul that one will come from his line whose kingdom will be forever—is a promise that can be trusted (2 Samuel 7:16). She knows that the promise given to Jeremiah and his people when they are about to be taken into exile, Surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future filled with hope—is a promise that can be trusted (Jeremiah 29:11).

When the way forward is not clear, when people confound you, when life doesn’t make sense, we join with Mary in declaring, Let it be to me according to your word.