

“Let It Be”

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Texts: Jeremiah 1: 4-10 and Luke 1: 26-39

Many years at Christmas we hear or sing the song “Mary, Did You Know?” What we don’t do is sing anything about what if Mary said, “No.” When we do that, we don’t honor Mary’s part in this story. When God calls someone, God waits for their response. Both of our stories today are stories of God calling someone. First, Jeremiah. Second, Mary. Of course, there are many other call stories in our Bible, but most of them have the same thing that happens. God speaks, the hearer listens, asks questions, ponders, and responds. Some, like the prophet Jonah, run away from the call. Isaiah protests that he has unclean lips. And on and on. This matters for many reasons, but most of all, Mary’s “yes” sets everything in motion for Jesus’ birth and our Christmas. Importantly, for Mary to say yes, she needs to acknowledge her fear. This is instructive for us as we consider our own call that comes from God.

Rev. Dr. Boyung Lee begins commentary on this passage, “When the angel Gabriel appears to Mary, her response is not immediate acceptance but confusion, resistance, and fear. The text tells us that she is ‘greatly troubled.’” Do you remember a couple of weeks ago I shared with you the word *tarassó*, which means troubled? The word used this time is *diatarassó* which means “greatly troubled.” The Greek chosen intensifies the original word suggesting that this is not just inner disturbance but a deep, bodily dissonance. “Mary is not simply puzzled—she is shaken, thrown off-balance, possibly afraid for her life.”

I imagine you have heard this before in the birth narratives about what could happen to Mary if she said yes to Gabriel's invitation. "To be told—without warning—that she would bear a child by divine initiative wasn't just a spiritual shock; it was a profound social and bodily risk. Her 'yes,' then cannot be read as simplistic or naïve. It emerges from a complex matrix of vulnerability, trust, and survival."

That is true of all who have been called by God. I believe that all have been called by God, but usually we miss the call, misinterpret it, misapply, or just plain ignore it. Nevertheless, when God calls, it is natural, right, and good to ask questions, to address our fear, and to wonder whether or not we should engage. This is not because God is wrong, but that when we commit to God, we commit to something much greater than ourselves and it almost always involves risk. It's important we learn from our biblical heroes that questioning is always part of the dialogue we have with God. It matters that Mary questions.

"How can this be?" she asks. Dr. Lee reminds us, "It's not doubt—it is agency. It is a boundary drawn around her body, a claim to her own understanding before consent. Gabriel does not rebuke her. Instead, [the angel] offers a promise: divine initiative (the Holy Spirit will come upon you') and shelter (you will be overshadowed'). These words carry no hint of coercion; they speak of protection, not domination. Her consent remains essential. Mary listens, considers the impossible, and then responds with courage: 'Let it be with me according to your word (Luke 1:38b).'"

For the purposes of our theme this Advent, this is not about fear erased—it is fear acknowledged and moved through. Remember, fear tells us what is important to us. If it doesn't matter, we'd have no reason to be afraid, but when our life, or our livelihood, or our relationships, or whatever are on the line, fear tells us to pay attention. Like we've said, though, fear that is not acknowledged can cause a whole host of problems. Mary made her choice, Dr. Lee tells us, "with trembling faith."

Luci Shaw authors a powerful poem she calls, "Mary Considers Her Situation." It reads:

*What next, she wonders,
with the angel disappearing, and her room suddenly gone dark.
The loneliness of her news
possesses her. She ponders
how to tell her mother.
Still, the secret at her heart burns like
a sun rising. How to hold it in—
that which cannot be contained.
She nestles into herself, half-convinced
it was some kind of good dream,
she its visionary.
But then, part dazzled, part prescient—
she hugs her body, a pod with a seed
that will split her.*

Let's leave Mary for a minute and think about Jeremiah. When God calls to Jeremiah, the first response he has is to tell God what God already knows, that he is only a boy. He is gripped by fear that he is too young to speak for God. It happens to many of us. We're too (fill

in the blank) to speak for, or act on behalf of, God. Like Mary, and like Jeremiah, we hesitate when something important comes across our life path. We need reassurance, and in the case of Jeremiah, he is told “Do not be afraid...I am with you. (Jeremiah 1:8).” Dr. Lee tells us, “What connects [Mary] and [Jeremiah] is not a lack of fear, but a deep, trembling resolve to move forward anyway—not with certainty, but with open hands and the courage to say yes, even in the unknown. Neither Mary nor Jeremiah embody boldness as spectacle. Their strength lies in quiet resolve—in the holy, hesitant yes that dares to trust.”

Dr. Lee takes us further by telling us that call often comes when we’re just trying to survive. Many of us live our lives just by putting one foot in front of the other. We live paycheck to paycheck, and we take life as it comes. We survive. That’s not a bad thing, but God does desire so much more for us than survival alone. God interruption to our “quiet survival” is not to exploit it, but to awaken the receiver to a fuller, riskier, more radiant self. But that call always comes with cost. Here’s what it cost Mary. “Mary’s yes will bring silence, estrangement, and pain. She will bear not only the Christ child, but the burden of imperial suspicion, poverty, and loneliness. That’s just the tip of the iceberg. Mary also puts her life on the line, knowing that she highly likely will be stoned to death for having “found to be pregnant,” with no regard for her life or that of the child. She would be forever described—very possibly—by less than flattering terms (to say the least) and Joseph as well would have his reputation tarnished, let alone losing the love of his life. There are a lot of bad outcomes possible here, and yet Mary, trusting God’s faithfulness, consents.

“We are often taught that fear is failure—something to silence or push through. But this Advent, we’re invited to see fear as information. Some fear protects us. But some fear

is the threshold of transformation—the fear that comes when we are on the edge of saying yes to God. The fear that signals deep vulnerability, and deep possibility.

Much of the Christian world today defines courage through a heroic masculinity—loud, bold, and certain. I suggest to you that the biblical narrative often tells us otherwise. Courage, in people like Mary and Jeremiah, Moses and Abraham, Jonah and Isaiah, is modeled differently. It takes courage to ask questions, to hesitate, to need more time, to take just one uncertain step. And in the case of our biblical characters, they never walked alone. And we do not either.

It's kind of an afterthought to the Mary call story that her first action after speaking with Gabriel is to visit Elizabeth. Elizabeth meets her with great joy and affirmation, "Blessed are you among women... (Luke 1:42)." Elizabeth becomes confirmation and community. All of us need some kind of confirmation of our call. In our United Church of Christ, people who wish to be ordained must hear the call of God, but must also have it confirmed by the church as gathered in the Association, and by a local congregation (or other authorized ministry) who calls the ordained person to their ministry. It is a fearful process for all who have gone through it, but such is the nature of call. Our fear doesn't disqualify us—it's part of the process. "And God promises to walk with us, every trembling step."

Dr. Lee finishes the commentary on these passages with these questions for Advent:

What fear are you carrying?

What invitation are you resisting because you feel inadequate?

What would it mean to say yes-not fearlessly, but faithfully?

Dr. Lee suggests that Mary's words can become our own: "Let it be with me."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.