

Let it be with me
Menno Mennonite Church
December 20, 2020

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.

How we read matters...

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.

Christmas Stories, as is their wont, come in a particular shade. You know- the softened focus, the hint of snow in the air and that dash of magic just in the back ground. When applied to THE Christmas story, there is the holy glow to the holy people who find themselves in extraordinary circumstances. They have that self assured glow and patience about them. For even us outside the tradition of venerating the Saint per se seldom do we read these stories with a moments hesitation, fear, doubt. Everything is flat, even and matter-of-fact. Perhaps we have just heard this read too many times with the British accent and the stiff upper lip that attends it.

I think we are poorer for it, making these experiences clinical experiences of revelation. Because it robs the humanity from it all. When you think about it, it is all rather shocking. 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. 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. When the name of God comes with consequence (including a lot of phrases that end with “lest you die”), the messenger of the Most High is something a good deal more than just perplexing. You may not know what is going on, what it all means, or what happens next, but you do know that it will undoubtedly change your life from there on out.

I wonder: do we stick with Mary meek and mild because it is our way of making sense of what this is; turning the revolutionary invitation to a casual business proposal? I think we would like that. Sometimes what makes Saints, Saints is the notion that they are just that—breathers of rarefied air, never to be touched by the likes of us. They never speak out turn. They are completely unflappable, and they come with a fully formed notion of what YHWH God has for them on the other side of what is being asked. I think we like that because it eliminates the

possibility that God would ever do something even 1/100th so bold in our lives. We like our world, our plans, our ways, thank you very much, and we don't need God to come in and muck things up for us. This is far less about God getting out of the business, and far more about us convincing ourselves that God cannot change the world anymore, especially if God can't ask something of us because we aren't the right people. Its faulty, but most of the time it works.

And this is not to knock Mary unduly off her pedestal. There is much to admire in her and about her. Co-redemptrix might be a bit much for my analysis but there is something to be said her: She said yes. She encountered all of this and she said yes, and that, friends, is a big deal. Because she has plenty of reason to say no. *"You are going to conceive by the Holy Spirit 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."* When you are an unmarried virgin subject to the honor codes of Ancient Near East, to say nothing of the Mosaic law, becoming pregnant outside of wedlock (and there is Joseph to consider her too). And let's just say that works out. Your son is going to become the high king of Israel; during the occupation of a bloodthirsty empire who prefers to behead first and ask questions later. This is not good news. This is not the Messianic promise at it was understood—right from day one. This is a mortal threat to her and her whole line. We do Mary a disservice, and ourselves with her not to allow her even a moment's pause before singing up.

What makes Mary Mary, worthy of admiration is not the absence of these fears and thoughts; it is her ability to feel them and to still find a way to say yes even so. 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. She finds a way to believe the unbelievable, and to hear the invitation and live to sing its praises. That is worth admiration.

So often we see our world as beyond us, and we but spectators in it. The problems are too big, the structures too entrenched, God too far out of reach. When we are honest, there is much that we fear and shrink back from, preferring our controllable problems as opposed to the ones of God and the kingdom. Yet God keeps on asking to be born in us, to become fleshed through us. We don't always know where this happens, or how this happens, but it does happen. And while the Angel Gabriel might be off the scene for some time already, God invites us always into what God is doing already around us. We are invited to see, to know, and to ultimately say yes too.

God has never stopped asking to come into the world; God never will stop. 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, where ever 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.

It's worth saying too that God is not a one-time-only offer either. This is not one of those commercials with the clock permanently set to "only 15 minutes left." We need not worry to miss the Angel invitation simply because we happen to be too busy, too pre-occupied, too depressed and distracted to get it at any one time. I have to tell you right here today I think my response to the angel metaphorical or literal would be "you have got to be kidding me". God persistently comes and invites us into the new, even when that newness can blow our very minds. Yet we will never stop God from coming. Because God cannot be kept out of God's own world, no matter what happens along the way.

You may have heard me from time to time inserting the phrase "in Spite of us" into the litany of things that God will do. I mean that sincerely. God invites us, desires us, pleads for us to come along and be part of what God is doing. But we are not always going to get that right. We do not respond as confidently, certainly, openly, or faithfully as we might wish. We

spend a lot of time talking God out of God's own ideas. God's plans for God's world always involve us, but they are not dependent on us. God's purpose, what ever that might be, will make itself known no matter how many Marys we happen to have in our ranks. We are invited into what God is doing not as an act of logic, self improvement, or self preservation. Rather, it is the simple act of faith that declares despite all the evidence to the contrary

"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed... He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."

O People of God, may we find our own way to be like Mary and open ourselves to God's hope; God's reality; God's completion as we seek to let it be in us according to God's will.
Amen.