

“Let It Be” / Luke 1:26-35, 38 / 16 December 2012

Oh, Mary, you're in trouble. Young, not yet married, pregnant, and your fiancé knows nothing about it. You're in trouble, Mary. There was a day that some of us might recall when a girl in Mary's situation would be ostracized from polite society. Happily, that day has passed. But being shunned is nothing compared to what might happen to you. The best you can do is to run away to some gentile city and sell yourself to foreign men. If you stay in Palestine, they could very well decide to stone you to death, you and your baby. Can you imagine the mobs, brandishing stones, the angry faces, the rocks being hurled from every direction? Can you imagine, Mary? I can't. And yet, you have the inner fortitude to say, “Let it be. Here I am, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. Let it be.” Oh, Mary, teach us your calm. What deep inner wells of joy enabled you to speak into the face of such danger those words, “Let it be”?

Lloyd was in his mid-eighties and about four and a half feet tall, which put him an inch or two shorter than his wife. The two of them used to walk to church, passing right in front of our house, and they didn't bother walking side-by-side. No handholding for Lloyd and Dee. No, Lloyd usually outpaced Dee by eighty or ninety feet, and no looking back! He'd served proudly in World War II, where he saw the far off isles of the Pacific Ocean. One day, I got a call telling me that Lloyd was in the hospital, and the doctors had sent for his family. I don't remember what his condition was, but they said that he probably had a few days to live, possibly hours. And so, I hurried off to the very small hospital that served that town. Upon arrival, I was dismayed to learn that Lloyd had been given the infamous Room #99. This was a large, isolated room that was tucked off in a corner close to the nurses' station. There was only one bed in Room #99, and it seemed to be the place where that hospital sent its most hopeless cases. In all honesty, I'd never seen anyone survive a stay in Room #99. It was essentially hospice care. I'd made all too many visits to that infamous room; it was always a scene of grief and loss, a place for sorrowful goodbyes. And so, as I rounded the corner to Room #99, I paused and took a deep breath, whispered a tiny prayer. Nothing very eloquent. I think the prayer went like this, “Help!” Then I pushed open the door, to face the dying man, and his grief-stricken family. There Lloyd was, sitting up in bed, reading the newspaper. When he glanced up to see me, he said, “Hi, pastor! I hope you're not missing your dinner. Hey, did you hear about the layoffs up in Bradford?” Dumbfounded, I said, “Lloyd, I thought you were dying.” And he replied, “Oh, I'm dying alright, but I'm glad I never got laid off.”

It hardly seemed like a deathbed scenario. In fact, I'd never seen Room #99 looking so full of life. Lloyd's wife was sitting there, watching TV, and his adult daughter was there from New York State, reading a magazine. I chatted with Lloyd for a while. He said to me, “I was in the Navy in World War II. The Japanese sank our ship, and most of my shipmates drowned, but someone pulled me out of the water and into a lifeboat. I could have died sixty years ago. You think I'm going to complain if I die now? No, I figure it's about my turn.” Ah, but it was not Lloyd's turn. Indeed, Lloyd is the only person I have ever known to walk away from the bed in Room #99 under his own power. He sprang back to health and went on to live another four years.

Now, Lloyd was not a philosopher or a learned man. I occasionally heard him say things that aren't considered socially correct nowadays, too. But I'll never forget the sight of him sitting up in his deathbed, reading a newspaper, worried about the layoffs up in Bradford. He was saying, with Mary, “Let it be.”

“Let it be” means embracing what is, instead of wasting your energy wishing for what is not. “Let it be” means accepting difficult realities, coming to terms with a hard truth. “Let it be” doesn’t necessarily mean giving up or giving in. It just means reaching a place in life where we understand that the struggle is futile, and the best we can do is to readjust our plans. In fact, we usually only reach the place where we can whisper “let it be” after we’ve done everything in our power to prevent it...whatever “it” is! “Let it be” only comes after we’ve exhausted ourselves trying to get out of it.

The world must have stood in need of a special kind of comfort back in 1970, the year I was born, with war raging in Vietnam, and the Kent State shootings, and President Nixon in the Whitehouse. With all the terrible events and the troubling changes that were taking the world by storm, musicians seemed to sense that people needed consolation, for they produced songs like “Bridge over Troubled Waters,” by Simon and Garfunkel, and the Beatles reassuring song, “Let It Be.” Do you remember the strange lyrics to that song? “Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be. There will be an answer. Let it be. Let it be.” I always thought the song had Roman Catholic leanings and that McCartney was referring to that courageous young woman, Mary, who first uttered those words, “Let it be,” when an angel announced to her that her world was about to be turned upside down. But it turns out that the “Mother Mary” in the song is McCartney’s own mother—who had died of cancer when he was only fourteen. Her name was Mary. McCartney had had a dream in which his mother came to him in the night and whispered words of comfort. “Everything is going to be okay. Just let it be.”

I’ve had dreams in which the dead seemed to come and visit me in real and powerful ways. I’ve had dreams in which I’ve felt myself in the happy presence of someone I hadn’t seen in many years. But think about that long ago Mary—the mother of Jesus—and all she had to lose! Her interview with the angel Gabriel might have been a dream or a vision, but it cannot have been a comforting thing. Think about the danger of being found pregnant in her judgmental culture, a society that was even harder on women than our own. Consider the deep inner wells of strength that enabled her to peer into the face of such danger and speak those words of wisdom, “Let it be.”

“Let it be” is not a passive thing for wimps or lazy people, as if to say, “There’s nothing I can do anyway, so just let things happen however they will.” No, it takes real courage to admit an uneasy truth. “Let it be” is about making room for cold, hard facts in our lives—whatever those facts may be. Sometimes it means naming a truth that nobody wants to acknowledge. Oh, we’ve all stood by helplessly and watched the sad spectacle of someone who refuses to let the truth be, denying it, hiding it, avoiding it, numbing it. In the end, it’s a lot harder and more tiring to run from the truth than it is to face it head-on. When faced with undesirable truths—as Lloyd and Mother Mary were—most of us will run a good, long distance before we finally utter those wise words, “Let it be.” Consider all the alcoholics who can never get better until they admit that they’ve got a problem! But the admission is just so hard. Think about all the broken families that can never heal until they own the fact that there is some form of abuse taking place! But who wants to face the truth that someone they love is an abuser? What about all the unhealthy relationships that can never be made whole until both partners open their eyes to the little acts of coercion or manipulation that poison the love and create shame.

Facing hard truths takes courage. Sometimes the most courageous thing that you can do is to let the truth be. Let it be named! Let it be addressed! Let it be...given a

place at the table—even if it is something that you do not wish for. If it's a problem that needs to be resolved, then that work cannot be done until you've made allowance for its existence. And if it's a simple reality that must be lived with, but never changed, then you'll only be able to move forward after the truth has been embraced.

In the family I grew up in, we very much preferred to plant our heads squarely in the sand. Maybe your family was the same? In our case, I think it had to do with our old German stoicism. Facing unpleasant realities meant that messy emotions might come to the surface, and nobody liked to deal with emotions. There were unwritten rules about emotions, rules that everyone understood and nobody ever named. Not all emotions were bad. It was perfectly okay to express your contentment...as long as you didn't go overboard and become overenthusiastic. It was also acceptable to feel bored, because at least among children, boredom meant that you were cool. The third and final emotion that you were allowed to express was annoyance, but never toward adults. I don't think my family was alone in this. I think many of us grew up knowing that we can't let some truths be, because if we did, they would push us into emotional places where we didn't want to go. I mean, just look at Mother Mary's emotional display, breaking out into song like some silly character in a Broadway musical. And look at the subversive words that she sings. It's radical stuff about the lowly being lifted up and the rich being sent empty away. An emotional exhibit like hers would be unacceptable in most of our families!

In a world where our acceptable emotional responses ranged from contentment, to boredom, to annoyance, we were ill-prepared for the announcement that grandma had Alzheimer's disease. Her two adult children didn't feel free to admit the truth of it, and they responded with a resounding, "It cannot be!" And they went on living as if it was not. The son with whom she lived continued to allow her to dress herself, which became a real embarrassment, to go grocery shopping, and to take long walks. Those excursions outside the house always ended in kindhearted neighbors driving her home after they had seen her wandering about town, lost. Her daughter sternly insisted that she remember things. The daughter would say things like, "No, mum, dad's not coming home from work today. He's been dead for ten years," causing her mother to relive all that grief anew, and unnecessarily, every single day. It can do so much harm when we refuse to live with an unhappy truth. It prevents us from slipping naturally into a different way of life and finding our way forward from a place of genuineness. Fear is the thing that keeps us from saying, "Let it be." Fear is the thing that keeps us frantically pushing buttons, hoping that one of them will work; one of them will reverse the truth; one of them will magically beam us back up to the Mothership and a happy ending.

We can really mess things up when we lack the inner strength to say, "Let it be." I was watching old Seinfeld reruns recently, and I saw the episode where Jerry's whiny friend, George Costanza, decides that he needs to curry favor with his boss at work. His boss is an African American man, and so George tells him that he looks like Sugar Ray Leonard. Naturally, the boss—who looks nothing like Sugar Ray—is offended. George comes back to their Manhattan coffee shop to tell Jerry about the embarrassing incident, and he complains, "I couldn't leave well enough alone. I had to say something. Now my boss thinks I'm a racist." Jerry asks, "Are you a racist?" George replies, "No, I would have marched on Selma...if it was on Long Island! I still might." Those who lack self-awareness will always pay double for the truth because it will take them by surprise. Oh, the troubles we create for ourselves when we live frantic lives of trying to change things

that can't or shouldn't be changed! Sometimes the only way to have a happy ending is to slog through the hard work of saying, "Let it be."

Of course, there are things that can and must be changed. There are things that can never be accepted, injustices, and inequalities, and cruelties that it is our duty to oppose. I mention the march on Selma because it is a defining part of this congregation's story. Responsible people of faith could not let the Jim Crow Laws be. They were a fixable injustice, as is hunger, and homelessness, and environmental degradation. We understand that "Let it be" is not a call to helpless acquiescence to the dark realities of our world. But in the silence of your heart, in your stillest moments, you do know which things must be changed and which must be accepted. As H. Richard Niebuhr's old prayer says, "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."

"Let it be" is also a prayer. In fact, the word "amen" that we use at the end of most of our prayers, simply means "let it be." Leave it alone. Don't mess with it. Let it be. Amen. In times of anxiety or distress, in times of waiting or uncertainty, what about simply whispering this prayer? What about those three simple words on the lips of Mother Mary, "Let it be"? I don't know what's going to happen. I don't have it all under control. But I can only move forward if I accept the things that cannot be changed. Maybe it's time to say, "Let it be." Maybe things can and should be changed, but begin by owning the things that are, let it be. From that place of honesty and clarity, you can begin the new task of moving forward amid realities that you would not have chosen. Whatever you are facing when you walk out those doors; whatever obstacle or hurdle you must own in order to move to a place of peace; whatever challenges, or fears, or hard truths you must accept, it will do no good to pretend that they aren't real. The sun only rises out of darkness. The summer only comes after winter. Resurrection only occurs after crucifixion. Let it be named. Let it be addressed. As undesirable as it is, let it be given a place at the table. Begin with this simple prayer of Mother Mary—a young lady who really had a lot to lose: Let it be. You can deal with the things that you've faced. "Whisper words of wisdom: Let it be, let it be. There will be an answer. Let it be." Amen.