

CMCL
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“Yes! Let it be!” Last week our focus was on Mary’s use of that phrase, in response to the angel who came to invite/inform her that she was chosen to carry the Messiah into the world. “Let it be with me.” Not so much the yes of free choice and legal consent, but a yes of shaping our selves and our lives to the challenges and gifts that come to our doorsteps – oftentimes unbidden, sometimes welcome, sometimes not. And “letting it be” being a yes to life even though it brings uncertainty and complexity, a yes to the inevitability of light *and* dark, night *and* day, a yes to imminent birth and eventual death. A yes to fullness and loss, ecstasy and sorrow – all guaranteed components of life.

Today, our story is that of John the Baptist. I think we can say, just as Mary and John the Baptist are two very different people, “letting it be” seems to be a different response to a different question in their stories, too. We are reading Mark now – in fact, Mark’s gospel will be our main source of New Testament scripture until Advent of next year. Mark is the soul of brevity compared to Matthew, Luke and John: his gospel contains no birth narrative for Jesus at all. Mark jumps right in with John the Baptist’s story, and we only meet Jesus at the moment of his baptism. No wise men, no shepherds, no manger in Mark. John the Baptist is introduced via a reference to Isaiah 40, which we’ve also read this morning. This introduction signals very unsubtly that John the Baptist fits into the stream of Old Testament prophecy. Mark is *introducing* a prophet (John the Baptist) by *quoting* a prophet (Isaiah) who prophecies the coming *of* a prophet or Messiah (Jesus, in Mark’s opinion): a prophet with a voice who will cry from the wilderness: “Prepare the way of the Lord. Crooked places shall be made straight, every mountain and hill shall be made low” and, as Handel’s *Messiah* so beautifully puts it, “every valley shall be exalted.”

Here’s where we find the “it” for today: the “it” in “Let **it** be!” That is what *it is* that is coming to be: a Messiah, to whom the prophet defers in humility, a landscape of reality that it is about to be turned upside-down. While Mary’s challenge was to take something in, to carry it, to *step up* to a main role in a narrative such as is not often given to a young woman, the challenge from Isaiah and John the Baptist is to let go, to make room, to *step back*, a posture not often honored for men to take in our culture.

Interestingly, almost all of the male participants in the Christmas narratives throughout the gospels are asked to participate in non-*stereotypically* heroic ways especially for men in our culture. When John the Baptist’s birth was foretold to his father, it was a situation much like Abraham of old. John’s parents, Zachariah and Elizabeth were elderly and no longer expecting children. Nonetheless, an angel came to Zachariah telling him they’d be having a child, and Zachariah simply couldn’t believe it. In response, the angel told Zachariah that he would be mute until his son was born. And sure enough, he could not speak until John’s birth. Joseph has a similarly surprising angelic visitation – he had already found out that his fiancée was pregnant and he was intending to quietly end their engagement. But an angel comes to him, and says, “this new life is of the Holy Spirit. Go

ahead and marry Mary once the baby comes. And until then, continue to support and protect her by maintaining your connection to her as a man.”

John the Baptist’s invitation is to be, not the main act, the headliner, but to be the opening act. The one who gets the crowd excited for the one they’ve *really* come to hear, whether they knew it or not. None of these invitations – to Zechariah, to Joseph, to John the Baptist – are the ones we’re expecting. They’re not like the call to Moses to “set his people free.” We are a people who are primed to care about the hero; that’s where the *real* action is taking place. I remember being blown away by an observation that Annali made a year or so ago. She loves reading, particularly fiction chapter books. But, she said one day, “why does every book have to have a main character? Why can’t every character in the book have equal time and attention? Why can’t their story be told?” What I was blown away by was that I’d never stopped to question that *of course* every book has a main character, and it’s understood that the rest of the characters are primarily foils for the action of the hero. She’s right – we absolutely expect every story and every situation to have a hero. And as readers it’s expected that we *identify with* the hero. That’s who you’re supposed to imagine yourself to be when you get lost in the story. The hero is the best and most important person in a story. Obvious!

The invitations in the Christmas stories the roles these men are cast in, are all supporting roles. Even Mary, who has more lines, perhaps, and a more direct role in ushering in the Messiah, she is not the main character, either. But as I read the headlines of our day, I hear the processing that men of conscience are doing these days: (trying to discern how to respond with integrity and self-awareness to the many #metoo revelations being shared primarily by women, of experiences of sexual harassment and assault) and I read the responses of politicians to their own crimes, or to those of their colleagues, some taking responsibility, some seemingly aware of the gravity of the allegations, many determined to stay in office, to continue to run for office, because no fate is worse than losing leadership and role; without that main character status, there is nothing; the alternative is simply intolerable. And I hear the stories of white men in the so-called alt-right (white supremacist) movements, who are very clear that they see their historic privilege and place being eroded and they’re not ok with it.

I have had many conversations in person with other women about these things. But I wonder, my male-identifying friends and CMCLers, do you have the circles of trust in which you can ask the questions of where you fit in our changing world, where you can try out what it means to be heroically non-heroic, as needed? Do you have community, non-gender specific, that supports the counter-cultural expressions of masculinity you are already living ? Do you find that space and support here, at CMCL? There are three main ways I can think of that make mountains low and valleys high: you leave it to water and time; after all, it only took 6 or 17 million years to form the Grand Canyon; a big enough earthquake hits near enough to reform the very terrain of the earth; a big enough explosion from a big enough bomb or a big enough excavator and steamroller. We know that massive change needs to happen. We know that when it comes to the interplay of relationships between humans and between humans and creation, the massive inequalities MUST be rectified. But are we so different from the many sexual predators who are

being exposed now, whose defense is simply, “Well, it used to be acceptable. Everyone used to turn a blind eye. I did it because I could get away with it.”

We do what we can get away with, far too often. Rather than making choices based on the example of Christ or what we know in our heart and our gut is right. We have the defense of the Colorado River – surely, time will eventually change the landscape - justice will eventually prevail. And it’s a convenient timeline for those on the mountaintops. But the news that John the Baptist brought, which I struggle to find “comforting,” was: “Get ready, because the world needs to change *now*. Brace yourselves for the earthquake. And indeed, Jesus Christ, the one who followed John, preached, taught, lived and breathed a Kingdom where last are first, oppressed are freed, hungry are fed, where those that usually speak take a turn at silence, those who usually lead take a turn at sidekick. God is not waiting for us to evolve into creatures and societies of justice. We are asked to live out justice *now*. No matter what the law allows. No matter what we can get away with or what we tolerate from one another. There is a fourth way to make mountains low and valleys high: to be like ants who, *en masse*, become the bridge they need to cross a divide, become the raft they need to survive a flood, though they know not how to swim. We can fill the valleys with our bodies, lifting one another high together. Jesus showed up as a baby, but in his coming we are asked to be grown-ups who help turn the world upside-down.