

How can I possibly stand before you this morning and speak with any credibility about Mary's experience? What do I know of being a woman in first century Palestine, the chattel property of her father? What do I know of coming to terms with an arranged marriage to a man she hardly knew? What do I know of a monthly menstrual cycle, an angel visit, being pregnant, giving birth on a barn floor? How can any male preacher hope to mine this story of WOMAN, writ large, and bring anyone to an encounter with transcendence?

Joseph I get. I get what it is to be a man, trying to make a name and a life for himself in what is Jewish normal, yet nothing about this birth is normal. I've written a song about Joseph's experience. I get what it's like to be cut out of a woman's experience, sidelined by all the realities I just mentioned. I get the message from the angel "do the right thing, Joseph." I was raised to do the right thing, even if it meant denying me. Do the right thing Blair. But Mary? Babies? Most Favoured one? I think I'm dealing with a bit of a credibility gap.

And yet, I can't not talk about Mary's response. After being told she was going to have a baby; after being told not to be afraid; after being told that nothing is impossible with God, Mary responds by saying "here I am, a servant of the Lord, let it be WITH me according to your word. She doesn't say let it be to me, she says let it be with me. She is entering into a partnership with God. She could have said no. If it was happening today, an unwed mom could drop into the women's clinic in East Vancouver and say no by way of a surgical procedure. Mary didn't say no, she said, I will do this with God.

How did she get there? What space was created, what light shone throughout her lived experience, how did trust grow so completely in the angel's word, that she was able to say "let it be with me according to your word?"

Preparing for Sunday's concert was a really great experience and I want to give Mary the nod and a huge thank you for producing what I believe is one of the finest experiences of community I've had. Everyone pulled together, it was a complete congregational effort. It was lovely to hear Ken say, the concert made all the changes we've made in the sanctuary, and all the work that went into those changes, really worthwhile. My only job was to find the readers and to find the readings. I knew I wanted Christina to read, and I knew as a young woman I wanted her to offer something around Mary's story.

I found one reading from a resource I've enjoyed using over the past few years. It wasn't perfect, but I liked it in context with all the other readings. I offered it to Christina and about three days later she came to me and said, "there's part of that reading that I just can't read. I don't believe it."

I want you to know that I've had a conversation with Christina and she knows, and is okay with my telling this story this morning. So there we were feeling squeezed, and if truth be told both of us a little annoyed. And yet Christina brings such integrity to her work that for her to read something that did not reflect her theology, even if it was part of a whole that I thought would work, she simply needed to make some changes. That's how this working relationship is going you know, we hold each other to this level of support and accountability.

Our conversation ended with my promise that I'd go looking for something else, or make some changes to what I had suggested she read. Well about an hour later, I received an email from Christina with her reading attached. She had taken time after our conversation, meditated for a while and sat at her computer and wrote what she shared with us; she told me it simply flowed out of her. After the concert, Christina told me that she has written poetry and prose before, but she has never performed it, or shared it publicly like that. From my perspective, she memorized it and offered it on Sunday, and again this morning, like an old pro.

When we had this conversation, Christina was very clear...I don't want people to think this is about me. It's not. It's about space opening for Spirit to work.

What space was created, what light shone throughout her lived experience, how did trust grow so completely in the moment that required her gifts, that Christina was able to say "let it be with me?"

I remember when Rob Waller and I asked Ken McKeen to co-chair the Somethin's Gotta Happen Special Campaign in the spring. The way Ken tells this story is that we downplayed the request in a big way, the time commitment and the content of the task, in order to get him to say yes. It was not intentional in any way but Ken did say yes, and by the end of the campaign, he'd become so immersed in the project, enthused completely by the experience of telling the congregational story to members of the congregation, he simply gave more and more of his time.

What space was created, what light shone throughout his lived experience of the church, how did trust grow so completely in the moment that required his gifts, that Ken was able to say “let it be with me?”

I was sharing this idea with Myrna on Sunday and she recalled the presbytery meeting we hosted in March. She remembers fielding the questions from the members of that decision making court without so much as a note. It was a bit nerve wracking because this was the court that would decide whether the plans we had for our future and particularly using the church lands for a housing development and a new church facility. She too reported that she never would have done that two years ago.

What space was created, what light shone throughout her lived experience, how did trust grow so completely in the moment that required her gifts, that Myrna was able to say “let it be with me?”

The list really is pretty extensive isn't it: Marion Kirk on the end of a camera, and courting Lynn Valley Businesses to be in partnership with us; Matt, our crazy cooky wonderful piano playing Matt, in a regular gig in a church; Bernice Lynn now into her own practice of prayer for the ministries of this church; Adrian Jorgensen taking on the constitution re-write; even Alan Marriot said to me after Friday Night Live this week, his performance on Sunday, wrapping up the whole evening with a poem created on the spot, put him on very unfamiliar territory. Think of all the things we're all doing that have moved us beyond our comfort zones.

What space was created, what light shone throughout our lived experience, how did trust grow so completely in the right moment that so many of us have been able to say “let it be with me?”

The key to our faithfulness is an absence of fear...or certainly reducing fear's power. The angel said, do not be afraid. Do you remember when we were all afraid? Do you remember moving coffee from downstairs upstairs. Do you remember moving the time for worship and the choir gowns and the choir loft, and the changes in the sanctuary, the risk to create Friday Night Live, call Christina, put a great big sign on the building to welcome people. We have been afraid and yet we are continuing. Audre Lourd was a black, lesbian, feminist who was poet Lauriat of the city of New York...she died of cancer a number of years ago...but I love her quote: “When I dare to be powerful -- to use my

strength in the service of my vision, then it becomes less and less important whether I am afraid.” (repeat)

Friends, light is shining in this place. Space is opening up for gifts to emerge.

I'd like to finish with something I wrote in an Advent Devotional produced by the National Church a couple of years ago. Katie Hughes read it on Sunday, but I think it really speaks to Spirit's movement in this place.

Sooner or later, we're all enlisted as servants of the Lord. Samuel was enlisted to become one of the greatest Old Testament Prophets. David was enlisted by Samuel to become Israel's greatest king. Solomon was enlisted to build the temple. Elizabeth, Zechariah's barren wife was enlisted to carry John the Baptist. A young carpenter, Joseph, was enlisted to marry the woman he loved, even though it seemed she was carrying someone else's child. And Mary? She was enlisted to carry that child.

Overwhelmed by their own insignificance, afraid of the outcome, theirs was a common response: “Who am I that God should want me to undertake such a task?” Like all of them before her, Mary asked, “How can this be?” Like all the previous encounters, the word from the God's angel is always “be not afraid.”

In time, we are all asked to undertake the task for which we feel neither prepared nor particularly gifted. In time, we are all asked to be the one who delivers the Christ child in dirty stables of the world's making. In time, we are all enlisted to birth the good news in a troubled world. Do not be afraid of your calling. For you have found favour with God.

What great news my friend. Amen.