

Sermon 23.12.17

Kate Heinzl, pastor UMC

Isaiah 61:1–4

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Luke 1: 26-38

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.' Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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. 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. For nothing will be impossible with God.' 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.

Sermon

(SLIDES that include videos can be found [HERE](#). Starting at slide 20)

(VIDEO - KIDS SWINGING)-

Do you remember doing this as a child? Or watching others, wishing you had the courage to take the leap? I do. I remember soaring through the air at Johnson Park Elementary school. That feeling of pumping my legs, getting higher and higher with each swing, and at the same time building up the courage to let go. Let go and fly....

A few weeks ago I came across an example in a book I was reading related to this - talking about trapeze artists and something called the dead spot. Not the most upbeat name, but stay with me.

The dead spot is the highest point of the swing, the arc. For the one on the trapeze, it's from that place, the dead spot, where everything begins. It's the place of an infinitesimal stop, and ending of sorts, from where new beginnings are conceived.

I learned that those comfortable on the trapeze don't rely on strength, they rely on timing. Strength isn't what allows change and, for those artists, tricks to happen.

Strength can save you if you make a mistake, they say, but if you're relying on strength you're doing it wrong.¹

For those on the trapeze, the dead spot is the place of possibility. It's where everything begins.

(VIDEO that ends with letting go)

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.

Can you feel the momentum building in this story? Can you imagine it as the swinging back and forth, the way, on a swing, you need to pump your legs to get going?

Like one on the trapeze - God doesn't rely on physical strength and dominance. For God, the potential, the newness, comes in the vulnerable spaces. A young woman.

Mary. Mary's life is humming, or following this metaphor, swinging right along. A predictable back and forth. A young woman, a girl maybe, engaged to be married. Likely, she's not a person who holds a place of strength or power in her community.

¹ <https://www.sfchronicle.com/entertainment/carroll/article/jon-carroll-3313337.php>

And yet... and then... something new appears.

(VIDEO...)

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.'

The unimaginable is uttered by this divine visitor. All of the waiting, the centuries of waiting for the promised one, has come to an end.

One of the keys about the dead spot for a trapeze artist is the timing. It takes lots of practice to feel your way into the exact moment to let go. To feel the space just before and just after. What's too early? What's too late?

It takes a lot of paying close attention to the moment at hand.

For us too, in this, our daily living. (Blank slide)

Mary said to the angel, 'How can this be, since I am a virgin?' 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.'

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. For nothing will be impossible with God.' 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.

I see Mary opening up to possibility here. Hanging out in the dead zone. Not rushing. Not feeling hurried.

Mary - who sometimes is seen as so meek and mild.

What a warrior she is!

Sometimes it seems that we can swing and swing... and swing. Holding on tight to that bar, unwilling or unable to let go, to be in that incredibly vulnerable place of not knowing.

Certainty is so seductive. It makes us feel safe and comfortable. It can lull us into compliance and deaden our questioning²...

² Rizzetto, Diane Eshin. 2005. *Waking up to what you do*. Shambhala Publications. Boston MA.

Without certainty, we might feel like the trapeze artist, hanging between the bars. But grasping tightly to certainty, we swing back and forth, never willing to let go...

Let it be with me... says Mary
That line - it touches me deeply -
Here am I, your servant, let it be with me...

What openness to possibility! What vulnerability!

This past week Karl Bartsch and I were having a conversation about purpose and meaning; purpose, meaning and connection with others, and how that involves vulnerability.

We both said how we long to go below the surface in conversation - beyond talking about what we're doing - whether it's travel or involvement in activities, and to dive a little deeper. How we long to hear about one another's inner life. That's not easy. It's a little like letting go of the bar, and moving into the inbetween space.

Karl recounted a conversation with someone he'd reconnected with at Foxdale recently, and saying 'tell me about your life'... an invitation to go a little deeper.

That question, or invitation really, was a vulnerable space - both to ask, and to be asked.

Have you found yourself on either side of that question? The desire to listen carefully and connect - and maybe that's met with an answer that forges connection... and maybe it's not.

Tell me about your life...

In that instance, for Karl, the conversation was deflected. The opportunity passed by. No letting go of the bar and moving into the unknown, unsure what's beyond the safety of the bar.

What might it look like for you to let go of the bar - take a risk? (full VIDEO)

Maybe it's asking someone to tell you about their life... ask them how it is with their spirit...

Maybe you check in on someone who's feeling vulnerable this time of the year - someone who might be feeling lonely or not quite so full of holiday cheer.

Maybe you take the time to spend a few minutes in silence, listening for your own soul to speak...

Maybe you drop off a plate of cookies, or a container of soup at a neighbors.

Maybe you show up at a peaceful demonstration - outside your comfort zone.

Maybe you just show up...to a service like this... that might be an act that requires great courage.

Mary simply said 'let it be... let it be with me according to your word.'

Somehow Mary's timing was just right. She must have practiced, somehow, able to let go at just the right moment, knowing, deep within, that her yes was just what was needed.

Where in your life, might you let go of the bar?

Here am I, the servant of the Lord, let it be with me according to your word.