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Based on the sermon for Advent 4B, 12/19/1993, "Let it be"  
Luke 1:26-38

In the name of the Father and of the + Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

<sup>38</sup>And Mary said, Behold the handmaid of the Lord; be it unto me according to thy word.

As I have gotten older and grey-bearded, I find myself thinking back on my father more and more. Especially at this time of year, when thinking of Mary the Mother of our Lord, I also find myself thinking of my Dad, for Mary's self-surrender to the will of God for her served as strong encouragement for my father. "Let it be with me according to your word." That became his prayer too.

When I was a teenager growing up in the 1960s, my father was approaching the end of his short life. Dad had major surgery for cancer when he was thirty-five years old. He had a slow growing tumor located between his heart and his lungs, connected with his thyroid gland, if I understand it right. The surgeons sliced him diagonally through the chest and around the back, and opened him the way a fisherman cuts open a fish. That gave him five years of health and work, but then the tumor re-emerged. So, he had the same surgery again when he was forty. When the tumor reappeared at age forty-three, the doctors said they could not operate -- that Dad would probably die right there on the operating table -- and so they sent him home, where he died slowly, at age forty-five.

Those ten years between the discovery of his cancer and his death from it were full of pain and exhaustion for him, but also they were good years. The family was growing up, he was able to teach us and inspire us, helping to make us children the people we are today. It is a mystery, his death. Heaven will have to explain it to me someday.

Now, Dad was an old-fashioned kind of guy. He liked old books, old values, old manners, and old music. Much of what I know and love about classical music I learned from my father during our Sunday afternoon tradition of playing chess and listening to music.

Dad had grown up as a street urchin, with no father at home and no particular moral teacher until he found the church as a teenager and came under the influence of his pastor. Eventually he himself went on to study theology and became a preacher. His mother - God, have mercy on the poor woman - lived a hard life and died young. Dad was a good student, they say, top of his class, but quit school after eighth grade as if it were the most natural thing in the world. The little I knew of his youth always sounded to me like chaos and suffering. But somewhere in that chaos, he discovered classical music and Christ, and he remained in love with such music and with Christ for the rest of his life.

Well, like I say, Dad was an old-fashioned guy approaching the end of his life, when I was a long-haired teenager growing up in the '60s. He liked old books, old values, old manners, and he did not like the Beatles! I think Dad figured that a guy who was struggling with cancer, who had lived through the Second World War and the glory years of the 1950s, who had worked hard and kept his hair cut short ought not to have to deal with these doggone Beatles!

But there came a day when, all of a sudden, Dad changed his mind about the Beatles. That was the day when Lennon and McCartney wrote the song “Let It Be.” You may remember the opening words to that song:

When I find myself in times of trouble  
Mother Mary comes to me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.

And in my hour of darkness  
She is standing right in front of me  
Speaking words of wisdom, let it be.  
Let it be, let it be.

To a man who was facing death, who knew that he’d have to leave his family behind and trust them to God... who figured that he’d soon be standing before the judgment seat of Christ ... to such a man, it was comforting to be reminded of Mary and her great words of surrender to God:

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

Mary is a great example for us of humility before God. The angel Gabriel had said wonderful things to her, but also they were strange things. The angel had spoken of fearful things... of the Holy Spirit and of the power of the Most High... of conceiving a wonderful baby, but in an unheard-of manner.

These are uncertain things. There is nothing in the usual upbringing of a human being to fortify you for such uncertainties. And Mary boasts of no worthiness or preparation for such strange promises. No, she boasts of nothing. The language she uses to describe herself is always the language of the lowly people. She calls herself a “servant,” a “handmaiden,” a person of “low estate.”

I am humbled very much when I think of what Mary has done. Naturally, she had her own hopes and dreams as a young woman. She was in love with Joseph. She was betrothed to him, which was a very high and formal relationship. She had her own hopes and dreams, and every one of them good, I do not doubt. Yet the Lord asks her to put all those hopes and dreams aside and to submit to his will for her. And she does it!

Altogether, in Mary we have a humble girl overshadowed by divine and strange events, and through it all she remains steady, as if she is following one star, one principle. That principle finds expression in her words:

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

Christian life has something to do with self-surrender like this. The heart of the Christian life is our willingness to echo Mary’s words, “Let it be.” When our fellowship with our Lord Jesus becomes so close and trusting that, to His every word and deed we can whisper back to him, “Let it be,” then we will have done all in our power to walk faithfully with our God!

Let me speak of three occasions in life for imitating Mary’s self-surrender to the Lord. Three times the Lord might speak to us. Three times we might want to turn the

Lord down. But three times we should do our best to follow the example of Mary and to whisper the words of self-surrender, "Let it be."

First off, I am thinking of those occasions in life when the Lord is calling us to consent to a path in life that we ourselves judge to be good, only, our heart has not yet caught up to the goodness of that path. Second, I mean the moral commandments of the Lord, for we will be at our best, when we can hear the "Thou shalt," and "Thou shalt not," and answer in reply, "Behold, the handmaiden of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." And the third occasion calling for our self-surrender is when we are facing a path that we judge to be bad and hard, and all reasonable people would likewise judge it to be bad and hard, yet the Lord is steadily leading us down that path anyway. Here, in this third case, I am thinking, for example, of my father, who faced his approaching death, grieved about it, fought as best he could to ward it off, but in the end, yielded to what was happening to him in the confidence that he would yet live through the grace and merits of the Jesus he had loved for so long.

First, let us consider the way life sometimes works out: that we face a path that we ourselves judge to be good, only our heart does not yet agree. Let me give you an example. Somewhere in this land, there is a seminarian or a young pastor whom Christ is crafting to one day be the next pastor of Immanuel Lutheran Church. He is acquiring his seasoning, she is polishing her skills, he is learning from life, she is studying theology and Church history, seeking to take her place in the ancient line of preachers. One day, Christ will entrust this congregation to that one. I know that will be good, but my heart is not really in favor of this process. I am strong! I feel I can go on forever. This is my home. You are my people. My heart just is not eager for the day when I must surrender the sacred desk to the next pastor. Still, I have prayed for that one. I have prayed that between now and then Christ will be very strong in the life of that young pastor and prepare that one for this position. My mind knows that it will be good for that one to appear on the scene someday. And so, in my heart, I try to follow Mary and to whisper, Let it be. Let it be.

Again, the young ones we love are growing up. Your son, let us say, is eighteen. He has been raised for independence. You've done well along those lines. He is ready to head off to college. And you know this is for the good, but your heart has not yet caught up with your mind. Or your daughter: she is happy, she is strong, she is rich in love, and in a way, she is gone, gone on to her own life. And you approve of this. It is only right and natural. God bless her! But as for you, you must learn to pray Mary's prayer, "Let it be, let it be."

Or again, your boss has had enough. He will take no more. You must enter alcohol rehab. You must join AA and each day for the rest of your life you must decline alcohol. And you know this is a good path, but it is a path against which you have kicked for many a year. Now, you must no longer resist. It is a good path and you must pray, "Let it be."

So, that is one case: the case where we should follow Mary's self-surrender and yield ourselves of to a path we know to be good, but which, for a while, is breaking our hearts.

Let's consider, the second case: The holy commandments of God and their place in our life. In the quiet of some night, when we find ourselves being very honest with ourselves, we might have to admit that that we have been resisting the moral will of our Maker for us. You know the Ten Commandments. Some of them might be easy for you. But one of them might be hard and you might have failed over and over again. Is it not time to join Mary's prayer, "Let it be *with me* according to your Word"?

And now we come to the hard path — the path you, or any reasonable person, would judge to be bad and sad and you do not want it, nor understand it. When I was forty-five, I was strong and full of life. Still am. But when my father was forty-five, he was dying. Yet God gave him grace such that he was able to echo Mary's prayer, "Let it be with me according to your Word."

I think that the faith that makes this possible is trust in the goodness and the wisdom of the Triune God, Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Let me give you an example from the life of St. Paul. In a beautiful and very personal passage in St. Paul's letter to the Philippians, he speaks of the possibility that his end is drawing near. Let me read the passage for you:

<sup>20</sup>...it is my eager expectation and hope that I shall not be at all ashamed, but that with full courage now as always Christ will be honored in my body, whether by life or by death. <sup>21</sup>For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain. <sup>22</sup>If it is to be life in the flesh, that means fruitful labor for me. Yet which I shall choose I cannot tell. <sup>23</sup>I am hard pressed between the two. My desire is to depart and be with Christ, for that is far better. <sup>24</sup>But to remain in the flesh is more necessary on your account. (Phil 1:20-24, RSV)

And so it is that Paul consents to a hard path — a path that any reasonable person would judge a cause of sorrow. That is, he consents to his approaching death. But notice that he consents in the firm confidence that he can trust himself into the hands of the Triune God, regardless of his understanding of the path ahead of him. He can join Mary's prayer, Let it be. Whatever God wills for me, let it be.

If you should get to feeling downhearted someday or conscious of failure in your life, you might wonder to yourself, "Am I worthy to repeat Mary's words of self-surrender? I mean, she was a saint of the church, a young woman richly endowed with the grace of God, the very Mother of God. Who am I to repeat her words to myself?" But I beg you, do not hesitate to make Mary's prayer your own. Surely, she herself wants you to do so, and more importantly, her Son Jesus wants you to do so, for he was always patient with sinners and there is not sweeter sound to his ears that to hear a sinner trying to make space in his heart, in her heart, for Mary's words of self-surrender, "Let it be with me according to your word."

I hope that we may take some encouragement from the example of Mary the mother of our Lord. For, by baptism, we are like her! We are what the angel said: we are God's "favored ones"! Why, we are favored with the promise of forgiveness of sins and everlasting life with Jesus in his kingdom. We already have been graced with His favor, in our Baptism and many times since. We do not need to offer our lives to Christ in order to gain his favor, but rather because this is the appropriate way for us, the baptized servants of God, to carry on, even when we do not know the exact details of our future.

Here we stand on the edge of Christmas, ready to sing our carols, open our presents, and eat our dinners. But this last Sunday of Advent asks us to hold back a bit... hold our breath for a final second and to consider this idea: The joy of Christmas hovers over humble deeds of self-surrender to God. Christmas joy is not some random happiness, but specific to a life framed by surrender... from a young woman who accepted an inconceivable baby, to a young man who breathed his last hopeful words on a cross: "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" and to his disciples ever since who look

into the God's will in their lives, and have enough grace to whisper the old words, "Let it be with me according to your word."

Friends, such deeds of self-surrender have been gracing your lives, both as individual Christians and as a congregation. May such deeds continue in you and increase, to the glory of Christ our Savior. Amen.