

**December 23, 2018**

**by Bob Sessions**

Last week Matthew Helmke began our Advent season with a wonderful sermon on John the Baptist. A good match, Matthew channeling the wild and hazy John. I won Jane's lottery and landed on Mary, mother of Jesus. Maybe not such a good match!

Thinking about Mary and Advent took me back to the rather elaborate Christmas pageants we had in our Methodist Church. Many of you remember those holiday events: children dressed as angels or shepherds or wise men, or as donkeys and sheep; and, of course, Mary, Joseph and Jesus center stage. While we didn't have live animals, we almost always had a live baby. There was a pecking order based on age, with the youngest playing angels or sheep while the oldest got the coveted roles of Mary and Joseph.

I was a sixth or seventh grader when it was my turn to be a wise man. Dressed in finery and fake beards, bearing our gifts we three strode down the center aisle singing the chorus of "We Three Kings" in unison followed by solos of the verses announcing our specific gifts. Sing it with me: We Three Kings of Orient Are, Bearing Gifts We Traverse Afar....

I remember this particular pageant well because when my solo came round my voice failed me. What's an eleven-year old boy supposed to do, with a packed church loving every moment of the yearly dramatization, and he's frozen with stage fright? Thankfully an angel, in the form of our Sunday School teacher, piped up and sang it with me. Apparently my paralysis wasn't the first of its kind.

I never got to play Joseph, a role I would have preferred. No speaking or singing parts. Like Mary, he just sat there looking...well, rather bored to be honest.

Advent was one of two times Mary appeared in our church. The other was a brief mention at Easter. Methodists, like Episcopalians, don't pay much attention to Mary. I suppose that's understandable, isn't it? It is his story, after all. And haven't all you parents experienced that moment when you become Carolyn's or James' mom or dad rather than being known by your own name?

Some people and traditions give Mary a much greater role in their religious practices, stories and theology, especially Catholics, and people like my wife Lori who view her as a manifestation of the "divine feminine." But I've never given Mary much thought...until I had to prepare this sermon.

I'd like to focus on three thoughts spurred by Mary's acceptance of God's request.

1) Mary is a saint. Not just because she agreed to give birth to the son of God (which would give any sane person pause), but because in her own right Mary was an extraordinary spiritual being. Through the ages, and even today, Mary has inspired remarkable religious experiences and actions. She is an exemplar of both humility and strength, and I have been greatly impressed by the ways in which she has provided guidance and inspiration to Catholics in places I have visited in Ireland, Italy, Mexico and New Mexico.

In my own life I've been fortunate to be the beneficiary of the divine feminine

many times. When I've gone through some hard times over the years, I sought and found grace through women who helped me get in better touch with my feelings, sort through my difficult or shattered relationships, and learn to heal through forgiveness and other ways of letting go. These stalwart women helped me sing through my troubles, as my teacher did when I played the wise man too many years ago. I have known some men who are deeply in touch with their so-called feminine aspects, and I hope that by now that includes me, but in my experience women have often been the source of the guidance and healing I sorely needed.

2) Jesus was a pacifist. We often speak of Jesus as a peacemaker, the Prince of Peace. No doubt he would call for peace talks between combatants today—between the factions in the seemingly endless wars in Syria and Afghanistan, between Saudi Arabia and Iran, Rohingyas and Myanmar Buddhists...unfortunately the list is long and bloody. But the Jesus we know through the scriptures actually does not act as diplomat or peace-loving leader. His calling and challenge is something far more difficult: in the Buddhist philosopher Thich Nhat Hanh's words, Jesus is called, as we are in turn, to "be peace."

A powerful turning point in my life was when I chose to be a conscientious objector and befuddled most everyone in my small town who expected me to follow through with my appointment to the Air Force Academy. I was given a deferred appointment my senior year in high school because of a sports injury and I went off to college expecting to transfer to the Academy my sophomore year.

But sometime during my second semester I experienced a profound dissonance between my Christian beliefs and the prevailing norms in the community of my upbringing—I couldn't reconcile Jesus' pacifism with a patriotic call to arms to fight Communism in Viet Nam. In retrospect, as a soldier I could have continued to argue against the war, and perhaps I would have been more effective at helping end that awful war as an Air Force pilot rather than by working with disturbed teenagers in far-away Alaska. But I felt I had to be a pacifist in order to live out Jesus' call to discipleship.

For me, an existential realization of the differences between being a peacemaker and being peace has shaped my understanding of how radical Jesus was. He, like his mother, practiced the most central and most profound of spiritual teachings: "not my will but thine be done." Can you be more counter-cultural than living the creed, "it's not all about me"; "my life is not all about me"? How would our society and world today be different if Christians everywhere chose to forsake our egos (or at least dramatically reduce them) instead of following the drummer who relentlessly tell us to stroke them?

3) Letting Go. For Lori this has been a year of thinking about and researching a new book about ancestors. Partly because of her example, in September I drove to the Black Hills to be with my deceased parents. All this focus on ancestors helped me realize I had some serious unresolved issues with my mother and father. It was an intense week mainly spent with our dog Cody and my thoughts and feelings, and I also had help from my younger brother Don. I finally realized that I needed to forgive my parents (and myself) for a variety of mistakes and slights. The key to the great healing that occurred during that week of camping, hiking and meditating was to let go.

Buddhists especially, but all religious traditions, really, tell us to live in the moment, realizing that all is impermanent and most everything is beyond our control. In other words, the quintessential spiritual act is one of submitting to a larger/greater power. Kierkegaard's "leap of faith." The often terrifying descent into the unknown.

We do this every day, of course, often without thinking about it. You got in an automobile to get here today despite the rather great risks. We know two parents who recently lost their adult children to auto accidents, events that can happen anywhere, anytime. You could slip on the ice tomorrow and break bones in such a way that you will never be the same. It's not just that life is full of risks, but that we take small and great leaps of faith all the time.

Mary took a huge leap of faith, one that all mothers take when they become pregnant: not only that your body will undergo lifelong changes, but that your life will no longer be all about you. You accept, however consciously, that you're now tied to another being whose joys and sorrows, whose lifelong journey you cannot escape. No wonder Mary is an icon: she embodies one of the most profound acts of letting go anyone experiences.

In the end, this most central of spiritual challenges is unavoidable. It's woven into the fabric of existence. The great spiritual exemplars, including Mary, tell us to let go, to end our false separation and join the flow. The unity we find will change us and the world of which we are a part. Mother Mary, Let It Be.