

Osler Mennonite Church
Dec. 31, 2017
Based on Luke 2:21-40

“Let it be New” by Audrey Bechtel

Thank-you for the welcome you have given me this morning. It is good to be here with you.

In May 1970 the Beatles released their album “Let it Be”

The first verse of the song with the same title written by Paul McCartney goes:

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"

[Chorus]

Let it be, let it be, let it be, let it be
Whisper words of wisdom
Let it be

Mother Mary in this song is not the Virgin Mary (although Paul was obviously aware that most listeners would take it that way), but Paul’s actual mother who died when he was young.

Paul said he wrote this after [a dream he had where his mother came to him](#) and said, “let it be.”

Let it Be. That is the theme we have been exploring during the Advent and Christmas season this year. For us these words have come from Mary’s response to the angel who announced that she would give birth to the Messiah. “Let it be to me as you have said,” Mary said. Let it be.

The idea of ‘letting it be’ conjures up different thoughts. One may think of two people having a disagreement. “Let it be,” you say. “Leave it alone. It’s not worth getting out of sorts about it.” On the other hand, Mary’s response to the angel is the exact opposite. “Let it be.” I will agree to participate in this plan. Bring it on!

Each week as we have looked at the phrase, let it be, we have added an additional word that has expanded the possibilities. “Let it be so,” you may have thought as you

accepted that new job option or heard the good news received by a friend or decided to accept whatever circumstance is yours.

When you heard the phrase, “Let it be whole,” you may have been thinking of the brokenness in the world or the person you know who is dealing with a difficult diagnosis. Your prayer may have become, “Oh God, hear my prayer and restore this situation or person to wholeness.”

Last Sunday, on the eve of Christmas when we could hardly wait for the next day, we felt the excitement of the children as they clammered, “Let it be now!” Yes, we wanted it all now – the angels and shepherds, the infant Jesus, the gifts and gatherings.

And now, here we are on the cusp of a new year. What will the new year bring to us, we wonder? What will we bring to the new year? What can and will you and I do to really “Let it be new,” in 2018?

Reflecting on our past

Reflecting on this thought took me back to my career as a chaplain in long term care. It was common when I went to visit someone that we would spend time reviewing the past, life review we called it – where they had grown up, what kind of family they had been a part of, what the most rewarding experiences and the greatest challenges had been in their lives, what had given meaning in their lives. As we would talk there were times when the individual would reflect on situations or relationships that had not turned out the way they had wished. Sometimes there were feelings of anger, at other times, feelings of disappointment or regret. If only it could be fixed, started again. What might one yet do to make that happen?

I was reminded of these conversations and new beginnings again this past week when I met a former student of my mother’s from her teaching days in an eight grade school house. He told me, “Your mother was my teacher. It was her first year teaching and several of us boys made life difficult for her. One day when we sauntered in some time after she had rung the bell, she was crying. After I was married, the way I had treated her really started bothering me. I finally went and apologized to her.” I could tell that this action had brought him great relief. Seeking and being offered forgiveness. Let it be new!

Throughout the Biblical story we find the idea of ‘God doing something new’ coming up time and again. Moses struggled as he led a people that were easily distracted from following the ways of God. More than once God had to do a new thing to get their attention: manna and quail in the desert, water from a rock, and a speaking donkey to name a few.

In the Psalms, the writer frequently calls his readers to sing a new song of praise to God. This often comes shortly after a lament or cry for mercy. Life has its ups and

downs, its moments of despair. The Psalmist recognizes that even in the dark night of the soul, God is our refuge and strength; a new day dawns calling forth a new song.

The Biblical Story

The time and circumstances into which Jesus was born were dark days. The Jewish people lived under Roman domination and the tax burden was heavy. They were waiting for relief. They looked to the prophecies from Isaiah that promised a new day. Surely this Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace must be coming soon. Surely life would be good then.

It is in this climate of despair yet hopefulness that the story in Luke's gospel unfolds. The Holy Spirit inspires and speaks to Elizabeth and Zechariah with unexpected news. They will have a son who will prepare the way for the Lord. The newness of this idea for Zechariah is reminiscent to the story of Abraham and Sarah. He and Elizabeth are getting on in years. How could this be happening now?

In today's scripture we heard about Simeon, a devout man living in Jerusalem, well versed in the scriptures and their promises, who was also waiting for something new. Luke tells us that "It had been revealed to him by the Holy Spirit that he would not die before he had seen the Lord's Christ."

On the day that Mary and Joseph brought Jesus to the temple to be consecrated to the Lord, Simeon felt a prompting of the Holy Spirit to go to the temple as well. Did he know what he was going to see when he got there? Probably not, but it became clear at the moment he saw Joseph and Mary with their infant son. Taking the baby Jesus in his arms, he began praising God that he had seen the fulfillment of the promise of salvation. As far as he was concerned, he was satisfied that his life's hopes and dreams had been achieved.

There was another person at the temple that day that also recognized the significance of the baby and his parents. Anna was a prophetess, 84 years old, who had been widowed at a young age. She had devoted her single life to worship, fasting and prayer, remaining in the temple day and night. When she saw the child, she also recognized the Messiah and began praising God and giving thanks for him. Then she began speaking about the child to everyone who was waiting for the Saviour.

Yes, after all their years of waiting, something new was happening. For Simeon and Anna who had waited so long for this revelation, the encounter was filled with thanksgiving, even while Simeon named the pain her son's message would cause Mary.

Our reality

As followers of Jesus, we have the benefit of the rest of the New Testament writings to see how Jesus took what was old and reinterpreted it to give it new meaning. He challenged the social and religious order that was encumbered by rules. Repeatedly, he

began with the words “You have heard that it was said,” and then would add, “But I tell you.” His message moved beyond law and even fairness to justice.

In Mt. 5 we read two of these teachings, “You have heard that it was said, “Eye for eye, and tooth for tooth. But I tell you, do not resist an evil person. If someone strikes you on the right cheek turn the other also.” And, “You have heard that it was said, ‘Love your neighbour and hate your enemy.’ But I tell you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you.” The teachings of Jesus challenged the religious establishment of his day, and continue to challenge the status quo in the Christian church today.

We live in a challenging time. The progress that was made around social justice issues over many years can no longer be assumed. Strident voices pit people groups against one another: whether by nationality, religion, race, or social status. We need to be reminded that justice is not just about us. Our environment is groaning as we take our natural resources for granted and struggle to adjust the lifestyle to which we have become accustomed. The negative newscasts can pull us down. We read the scriptures and find that 21st century patterns are evident throughout the Biblical story. Time and time again the people of God still have to be called back to faithfulness.

As we look ahead, how might we respond to God’s vision of a new heaven and a new earth? What new thing might we engage in during this coming year?

Earlier this year, when people were becoming discouraged by all the negative news, we at Wildwood Mennonite began looking for good news stories that we might commend. If we heard a good news story on the radio or read one in the newspaper or saw one on social media, we tried to find a way to contact the individual or group and write them a letter of commendation. The following Sunday interested persons were invited to sign the letter before it was sent off.

One of the people to whom we wrote was a restaurant owner in Emerson, MB. In a CBC interview she described how she found a group of five persons, including a child, huddled outside her restaurant door one morning as she was preparing to open. They were cold, having walked across the border through snowy fields. She invited them in and gave them breakfast. When asked what prompted her to do this kind deed she said she had children of her own and she hoped someone would help her if she ever found herself in such a situation. Then she said, not all of my family agree with my response. We felt she needed a letter of encouragement.

We are fortunate to live in a land of freedom and peace. Yet, when we listen to the news we know that not all is well within our borders. What new thing might you or I do to make our community a better place for all in 2018? Perhaps we can commit ourselves to learning to know a certain number of persons from cultures other than our own. Perhaps we can choose to become involved in a project where we work alongside persons who are marginalized because of mental health issues or poverty or lack of English language skills. Perhaps we can commit ourselves to become better stewards

of our earth. Perhaps you and I can be instruments in bringing hope to some who are despairing in our communities.

Mother Teresa is quoted as saying, "Not all of us can do great things. But we can do small things with great love." Love is something we can all give, and for some people that will be something new to receive. There is no price tag attached.

Today, on this last day of 2017, God is seeking to do a new thing in and through you and me in the year to come. May we trust that God will be our faithful guide and may we commit ourselves to partnering with God's vision for a new heaven and a new earth. Yes, let it be - new.