

KBF December 8, 2019, Advent #2

"Let it be to me according to your Word", Luke 1:38

("Gratitude for things set in motion by the birth of Christ")

What a joy it is for us to be back here with you during this Advent season! We are so very thankful and delighted to see how KBF is thriving, and how so many of you have pitched in and helped take care of this wonderful, special community. Advent is a season of waiting, longing, hoping; waiting for what? We wait not only for the celebration of Christmas a couple of weeks from now, although I know some are already enjoying the music and decorations, and looking forward to reunions with family.

But even more than Christmas celebrations, Advent is a time when we remember, we look back to the time of God's coming to us, entering our world as a human being, in the person of Jesus. We remember with joy, the angels and shepherds rushing to Bethlehem, and the wisemen tricking Herod; we remember the baby, born in a barn, because there was no room in the ryokan.

But we remember also that the word Advent means "coming." And during Advent we not only look back to that first coming of Jesus, we are also looking forward with joy, to his second coming. We who are followers of Jesus are people of hope and joy, because Jesus really IS coming again. "Joy to the world--the Lord IS come--let earth receive her King," we sing. Christ has come, and Christ is coming again.

As one writer expresses it, "*Advent is a season of expectant waiting, an awareness that all is not (yet) well, and longing for our world to be made right again. It is a season for restless hearts, and people weary of a broken world who want, with all our being, to know there is more than this.*"

(P.F. Reinders)

Is there something you are restless or uneasy about? Do you long for something to change?

Some of us are weary and grieved over the leadership and political situations in our home countries, grieved about corruption and injustice, troubled about poverty and wars; we are disturbed and sometimes confused over theological divisions in our churches. We grieve over family situations, we grieve over losses--of loved ones, of health, of family the way we wish it could be, or the way it could have been. And we grow weary of the struggle.

But as we celebrate the season of Advent each year, we are reminded, with hope, "there is more than this." This is not as good as it gets! "*The hopes and fears of all the years are met in thee, (in Jesus) tonight*" (O little

town of Bethlehem) All of my hopes and fears, all of yours, are being met, and will one day be fully met, when Jesus returns to this earth to take us to be with him. And at that time, **“He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has (will be) passed away.”** Rev 21:4

In this Advent series at KBF, you and I have been invited to live in thankfulness, in conscious awareness of all that has been set in motion, all that is now in process, (things seen and unseen) because of the birth of Christ, AND because of his promise to come again. **“I am going to prepare a place for you” (Jn. 14:2)** (Jesus told his disciples.) **“And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me where I am.”** (Jn 14:4) (We’re going home one day!)

What are some of the gifts set in motion by the birth of Christ? At our “thankfulness lunch” two weeks ago, a couple of people shared how thankful they were for **“Immanuel, God with us,”** (Matt 1:23) thankful for God’s presence in their lives during difficult times. We remember God’s promise repeated so often in the Bible **“Don’t be afraid; I will never leave you or forsake you.”**

In this season we are also grateful for the gift of peace (the kind that passes understanding) that we sing about in Christmas carols; *“Hark the Herald angels sing. . . Peace on earth, and mercy mild; God and sinners reconciled.”* We recall the words of the angels to the shepherds--“Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, and good-will to those who please him. . . .” Then there is the gift of the good news of great joy for all people that a Savior, a deliverer has come, who is Christ the Lord. The joy and peace come because in Jesus, a Holy God and us messed up sinners can be reconciled.

But of course you know that gifts from our friends, or from God, need to be received, need to be appropriated to be of any good. If you offer me something, and hand it to me, in order to appropriate it, in order for it to be mine, I have to hold out my hands and receive it.

Well, are there any conditions, or pre-requisites to appropriating these Advent gifts, of peace and joy and hope? I have been a follower of Jesus for a long time, but I don’t possess joy and peace all of the time--do you? What is wrong? IF God continues to offer peace and joy to his people, and I don’t have them in my life, what might I be doing that blocks or sabotages my appropriating those gifts? For example, I know that I refuse God’s gift of peace far too often when I allow worry and anxiety to consume my

thinking. If, on the other hand, I will remember to trust God when I start feeling anxious, If I will just remember that Jesus is here, right now, with me, peace comes. Isaiah 30:15 reminds us, "*in quietness and trust is your strength, but you would have none of it.*" *Too often, we refuse it.*

Failure to trust blocks Joy, and Hope. **The Apostle Paul writes, "May the God of all Hope fill you with all joy and peace AS YOU TRUST HIM" (Romans 15:13)** I also block God's gift of joy when I grumble or complain or get resentful about circumstances or people in my daily life-- and joy comes back when I remember to be thankful,

We spend a lot of time with grandchildren when we're in Chicago, and we are mindful of how unpleasant it is if they grumble or complain about something we offer--when they refuse to try some food we have prepared because they think it looks yucky; and also aware of how good we feel when they are thankful and say "that's the best dinner I ever had!" as 5 year old Sebi says sometimes.

What I know of my own heart, and what may be true of some of you, is that we are not receiving. appropriating all of the marvelous gifts that are offered to us in Christ. And I believe that grieves the heart of God when we refuse his Christmas gifts, just like your heart is grieved if you offer your child a gift, and they are indifferent to it or even reject it. And it also brings delight and joy to our heavenly Father when we receive, with thankfulness, what God brings into our lives.

The thing that has been most on my mind in this season is the heart attitude of Mary in this whole Christmas story. And it is a challenge to me, right now, at this time in my life. How did this young woman respond, what did she do with the gift, the calling offered to her, of giving birth and becoming the mother of God? How do you think you might have responded if you were Mary, or Joseph? Either of them could have refused, you know, saying "this is not what I was expecting, this doesn't fit into my plans! I think if it was me, I would have initially worried about what people would think. A nice Jewish girl, unmarried, and pregnant? Not socially acceptable in her culture. And what about her fiance, Joseph? How could he possibly believe a story about "getting pregnant by the Holy Spirit?" Would he leave her? What would their families think? That she was lying, or cheating on Joseph?

There was a whole lot of uncomfortable risk involved for Mary if she was to cooperate with God, and submit to this crazy plan! But far more than what people would think, what about being told she would give birth to the Son of God, who would reign forever?? Whose kingdom would never end??

What in the world was that all about? There was no doubt a whole lot she couldn't possibly understand. Could she trust God with her body, her plans, her future? We know that Mary did, because what was her response? "Let it be to me according to your word."

Now fortunately, Mary didn't have to try to convince Joseph, because God's angel also came to Joseph in a dream.

He was told him not to be afraid to go ahead with marriage to Mary--that the pregnancy was Spirit conceived. Joseph was also given a challenging, life-disturbing, calling from God. What was Joseph's response? We don't know what he said, but we know what he did-- Joseph obeyed. Matthew 1 tells us **"He did exactly what God's angel commanded."**

Both Mary and Joseph could have refused these strange callings, refused the risk --just as you and I are free either to refuse, or to trust and obey God's words to us. But they submitted, they trusted and obeyed.

Let's consider Mary's response-- **"I am the Lord's servant--Let it be with me according to your Word."** "Let it be"----those words have stayed in circulation over the centuries--even sung by the Beatles! *"When I find myself in times of trouble, Mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom, let it be, let it be. let it be."* Now the Beatles didn't include the next phrase--"according to your word" but there is still wisdom there.

In the face of a risky, out of the box situation, probably something she never imagined, Mary trusted God with her life and submitted, even though it probably didn't make any sense to her. She was able to let go of any "control" she might have felt about her plans, her future, her desires. Her cousin Elizabeth confirms Mary's heart attitude of trust in saying, **"blessed is she who has believed (who has trusted) that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her."** Luke 1:45.

Now in these days, the notions of "submission" or "surrender" are not very popular, although they have never been very popular with me! I am by nature more of a fighter; I am not a "let it be" sort of personality in situations I don't like. And of course there are many times in our lives when resistance is appropriate and godly and mandatory for Christ followers. We need to resist evil and injustice and falsehood--we are called to be the "Light of the world" and the "salt of the earth". So I am not saying we should "let it be" when we are confronted with evil or injustice or wrong doing.

I am talking about the times I resist something God has clearly asked of me, and I just don't want to do it--like to forgive, or be generous, or be unselfish; or to love someone even though I totally disagree with them

politically or theologically; or to submit, times when I resist welcoming or including someone I would rather not include; or, times when I don't want to remain in a situation or calling or relationship that is just plain hard.

If I refuse to do what Joseph did--just obey, or if my heart won't say to God, like Mary did, --**let it be with me, according to your word**, I am rejecting the Christmas gifts offered by Jesus, of peace and joy and hope, that God so much desires that I have!

Could you and I chose, this Christmas season, to adopt the heart attitude of Mary, that then lead her into joy, a burst of joyful praise to God--*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my Spirit rejoices in God my Savior?"* (Luke 1:46) Could we chose be like Joseph, just obey, just do the hard thing God told him to do?

There are other situations, over which we have no choice, no control; times when hard or undesirable circumstances enter into our lives, or get "put onto our plate" that we can't do anything to avoid or fix. There are illnesses or disabilities (physical or mental) in ourselves or in loved ones, that we just can't fix; there are job situations or disappointments we have no power to change; there are cancelled or delayed plans or trains or flights that really mess up our plans.

Could you and I, in those truly awful, or just annoying moments, those situations that are just not the way we want them to be; turn our hearts back to trust, to focus on Jesus, believing God is there, God is loving and powerful, and working for my good?

Recently I found an old devotional book published in 1884, with readings for each day, inscribed in the front as a gift to my great grandmother. There was a section that spoke to me, and maybe it will connect with some of you as well. The reading is based on Isaiah 48: 10 which says, "**I have refined you, though not as silver; I have tested you in the furnace of affliction.**"

Here is the author's comment:

"God takes more care with us than the artist with his picture, by many touches of sorrow, and by many cares of circumstance, to bring people into the form which is the very best in God's sight, if only we would receive his gifts and myrrh in the right spirit."

(Now do you remember what myrrh is, or what it symbolizes? It was one of the gifts brought by the wisemen when they came to visit the baby Jesus. At that time it was used for embalming--for death.) So this author may be talking about receiving, along with God's gifts that we perceive as good, also those that may involve losses or deaths to self, deaths to our plans and

desires.) (repeat: "if only we would receive his gifts and myrrh in the right spirit.") The author goes on, "*No heart can imagine in what great love God gives us this myrrh; yet, this which we ought to receive to our soul's good, we pass by. . .*

Then we come and complain, 'alas Lord! I am so dry, and it is so dark within me!' I tell thee dear child, open thy heart to the pain, and it will do thee more good than if thou wert full of (good feelings)

(J. Tauler in Tilston, October 29)

Another wise old saint (Madam Guyon) writes, "Ah, if you (only) knew what peace there is in an accepted sorrow." (1648-1717)

There was a time years ago when our marriage was in bad shape, and I felt deeply hurt by Gaius. And at that time, the pain was so great that I wanted to harden toward him to protect myself so that it wouldn't hurt so badly. But I became aware that if I allowed my heart to harden toward my husband, my heart would at the same become hard toward God; and it was only God that was holding me together. And I knew that a hard heart, for whatever reason, would result in distance from God, who was my life-line. And in order to have a soft, open, receptive heart toward God, I had to accept the pain as well. I did, and in time--not immediately, but in time, with some heart changes and counselling, restoration and healing came to our marriage.

As I get older, I am even more aware that we all at some points face pain and losses and circumstances that just plain hurt. And I have been needing to continue to learn in these years to open my heart to accept new pain in other areas of my life. And, I am finding, there is peace "in an accepted sorrow," as Madam Guyon testifies, and in "letting it be."

And I believe Mary opened her heart to the pain, along with the deep, indescribable joy of being the mother of Jesus. Remember the words that the old man Simeon spoke to Mary when baby Jesus was brought to the temple to be dedicated---"**a sword will pierce your own heart as well**" (luke 2:35)

Mary faced not only being unmarried and pregnant. She faced being told by the government that she had to travel to Bethlehem while 9 months pregnant rather than have the baby at home. And then after hearing that King Herod wanted to kill her baby, rather than going home to show the new baby to her mom, they had to escape from Bethlehem and become refugees in Egypt. As Jesus grew up, Mary was aware of the criticism and rejection of her son by the Jewish leaders, and she was there, standing by

the cross, watching her son suffer, and die. But somehow, she had learned to say, "Let it be to me, according to your Word."

We can only say along with Mary, "**Let it be to me according to your Word**" in the smaller frustrations of life as well as the bigger challenges and sorrows, if we choose, like Mary and Joseph, to trust the Word of the God who promises never to leave us, who promises to strengthen and help us as we walk through the fires and deep waters of life, who loves you and me enough to give his only son so that we could be with him forever.

Immanuel, God with us, is the best gift God has given to us in Jesus. And that God is worth trusting with my life, my plans, my agenda, my kids, my grandkids. And as I "trust in the Lord with all my heart" and relinquish control, relinquish "leaning on my own understanding," the gifts of Advent, the gifts of hope and peace and even joy can come flowing back in.

In this season, will you pray with me 2 things?

1. That that the God of all Hope, will fill us each of us with his gifts of Joy and Peace and Hope, AS we trust him.
2. And, will you pray that we will choose to say with Mary, with joy, and maybe along with tears, "Let it be to me according to your Word."

Do you all know the old hymn "Trust and obey?" Would you sing it with me now?

Trust and Obey, for there's no other way,
to be happy in Jesus, then to trust and obey.

When we walk with the Lord, in the Light of his word,
What a Glory he sheds on our way;
While we do his good will, he abides with us still,
And with all who will Trust and obey.

Chorus

But we never can prove the delights of his love
Until all on the altar we lay,
For the favor he shows, and the joy he bestows
Are for those who will trust and obey

Chorus

