

*Gelassenheit* (Let It Be)

Those of you who are especially observant will have noticed that on all of our bulletin covers during the season of Advent, right up to today's, there has been an image of Mary holding the Christ child, and beneath that image the words "Let It Be."

Beatles fans will also recognize this as the title to a famous song written and sung by Paul McCartney. There is a great article about it on Wikipedia. Apparently, Paul has claimed that the song, in which Paul talks about a certain "mother Mary," has absolutely nothing to do with the Virgin Mary of Christian faith. To which all I can say is, it may not have when Paul first wrote the song, but it does now.

As it happens, these words have been the overall theme for our Advent worship curriculum. They were taken from Luke 1:38, which has been on our Advent banners throughout the season. They represent Mary's response to the angel Gabriel, just after he had announced to her that she would conceive and give birth to the Christ child. Let's read Mary's words together: "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

It's a remarkable statement. It could be understood as merely a passive acceptance on Mary's part of God miraculously putting the Christ child in her womb. But we know from the rest of the story that her part in it was far more than a passive one. On her lips the words "let it be" are words of active participation, declared in a spirit of courageous, even brazen daring. The curriculum writers suggest that we might substitute another, more colloquial phrase, namely "Bring it on!" And I would suggest another: "Let's do this!"

Our Anabaptist forebears had a similar statement in their German vernacular, represented by a single four-syllable word: *Gelassenheit*. How many of you have heard about this word? We could go so far as to say it is one of the foundational principles of our Anabaptist-Mennonite faith. It could be translated by the three-syllable English word "yieldedness." *Gelassenheit*, in other words, is the act of yielding oneself to the will and way of God. Which, when you think about it, is exactly what Mary was saying. "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." All of a sudden we realize that Mother Mary, virgin or not, is a much more important part of our non-Catholic, duly reformed, Mennonite faith than we realize! At the very least, she is a model for us to follow. Let it be, Lord. Bring it on.

Let's take a closer look at this word *Gelassenheit*. Why is yielding ourselves to the will of God so important? First of all, it's precisely what Jesus did during his life on earth. Repeatedly. We could even say, constantly. Remember when he allowed himself to be led into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil? Or how about in the Garden of Gethsemane, when at first he pleaded with God to "take this cup away from me," but then ended up saying "yet not my will, but thine be done." That's *Gelassenheit*. Bring it on, God. Let's do this.

Is that what *Gelassenheit* means for us? Yielding ourselves to the point of suffering for our faith? Including even our own death? For many of our Anabaptist forebears, this is precisely what it ended up meaning. Except in their case it wasn't death on a cross, but by burning at the stake, and in the case of Felix Manz, drowning in the Limmat River, in Zurich, Switzerland..

But *Gelassenheit* meant far more for them than a martyr's death. It meant yielding themselves to God's will in every aspect of their lives. It began with an inner yielding (or what they often referred to as a "spiritual" yielding). But it resulted in something very external and visible—what we might call conformity to the life of Christ, including but not limited to his death. For some of the early Anabaptists, particularly the Hutterites, *Gelassenheit* included letting go of personal possessions and living instead by a common purse. Some modern-day Anabaptists, including Mennonites, have also chosen to live this way. Just ask the Ebersole family about their early years of living in Fairview House (which also included former pastor Mel Schmidt and family).

So what all might *Gelassenheit* mean for us, today? It might mean letting go of at least some of our personal possessions, those idols we cling to and love to accumulate. It might mean a willingness to suffer in a whole variety of ways, ranging from personal privation to public persecution. It might mean taking a public stand on an issue of Christian faithfulness and social justice. Pick an issue—there are lots of them. It might mean obeying a divinely given dream, rather than our human Herod, and "going home by another way," as the wise men did in today's story from Matthew. It might mean earnestly asking for God's guidance about a difficult decision. It might mean placing our future completely in God's hands, even if that includes uncertainty about job, home, livelihood. It might mean beginning each day with a prayer of yieldedness, perhaps "Not my will today, God, but thine," or how about "You are all I have; you give me what I need; my life is in your hands, O God; my life is in your hands." Go ahead and sing it, if that helps. Go ahead and sing along with Paul McCartney: "When I find myself in times of trouble, mother Mary comes to me, speaking words of wisdom: 'Let it be.'"

Or, I have another song to recommend. I invite you to turn in the green *Sing the Journey* songbook to number 81. This song became especially meaningful to me seven years ago, when Lois and I were in Israel-Palestine, where I encountered Jesus Christ in a very personal and profound way. The words of the song speak for themselves; let's say them together. "Take, O take me as I am; summon out what I shall be; set your seal upon my heart and live in me." Remarkable words, right? And profound, when we really mean them.

I've asked Erica to play through the song once, after which I invite you to sing along. As we would with a song from the Taize community, we'll repeat it several times. As soon as you can, I encourage you to put the book down and sing the words by heart as your personal prayer of *Gelassenheit* to God.

(After the song) Amen. Let it be. Bring it on. Let's do this.