

“The Heart of God”
Stouffville United Church
Sunday, December 20th, 2020

Luke 1:26-38

The Angel Gabriel, sent by God, arrives in the room where Mary sits. Many art works depict her sitting down, with a book on her lap over which she is pondering. She is clearly interrupted by this vision of an angel in her room. Gabriel tells her that she will become pregnant and her son will be none other than God’s son. Mary then asks one question – How can this be? And the angel gives a lengthy response, summing it up with the words, ‘For nothing is impossible with God’. To this, Mary simply says, “Here I am – let it be with me according to your word.”

Let it be. With me. According to your word.

Almost a life time later, Jesus is kneeling in the Garden of Gethsemane, in the hours before his betrayal by Judas, and he prays to God, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible; remove this cup from me; yet, not what I want, but what you want.” (Mk 14:36) Obedience becomes the markers of Jesus’ life – from Mary’s acquiescence to God’s will, to Jesus’ obedience that led him to his death on the cross.

The word ‘obedient’ has been a part of our culture for years. Inspired by bible stories from the church, these mores (mor-ays) became springboards for cultural values of obedience, often resulting in punishment for disobeying. Think no farther than God telling Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden to not eat from the tree of knowledge. But they disobey God, and eat the fruit from the tree of knowledge and as a punishment are expelled from the Garden of Eden.

Hollywood had big box office movies in 1956 that drew attention to the concept of obedience. Think of movie star Yul Brynner in the King and I, as he plays the King of Siam, the story cast in the late 1800s. Think of Charlton Heston in The Ten Commandments, as he comes down the mountain bearing in his arms the heavy tablets with the ten commandments written on them.

The Ten Commandments anchored church conduct and polity. ‘Thou shalt not’ was ingrained in our minds. The Book of Proverbs has many pearls of wisdom around obedience – “My child, keep your father’s commandment, and do not forsake your mother’s teaching. Bind them upon your heart always; tie them around your neck.” (Proverbs 6:20-21) Proverbs 13:24 inaugurated a whole list of repercussions for disobedience - “Those who spare the rod hate their children, but those who love them are diligent to discipline them.” If children in school didn’t obey the teacher, they faced consequences of the strap, being hit across their palms with a ruler or a belt. And spanking followed a child’s disobedience. A close second in impact on social norms was the part of the marriage vows where a woman said to the man that she would promise to love, honour, and obey.

On a global scale, obedience is an expectation in authoritarian regimes, where you obey the commander. The White House came perilously close to this when it appeared that President

Trump expected ‘loyalty’ from his staff: “Do as I say or you’re fired.” In some parts of the world, to disobey has strict, harsh, and inhumane consequences. Amnesty International reports that “on December 2, after just three weeks of temporary release, renowned Iranian human rights lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was ordered to return to Shahr-e-Ray “Gharchak” prison by Iranian authorities. She is serving a cruel and unjust sentence of 148 lashes and 38 years simply for defending women’s rights. She has steadfastly advocated for justice and equality, including serving as legal counsel for women peacefully protesting for the right to decide whether or not to wear the hijab (veil).”¹

Where do you find yourself with the word ‘obedience’ today? Is it in your vocabulary? It’s hardly found in our cultural lexicon these days, other than when our friends sign up their wayward puppy dog for ‘obedience training’. The post-Christendom context we find ourselves in has done away with the Charlton Heston’s and the Yul Brynner’s and the edicts of the Book of Proverbs. Our concept of obedience has shifted from a 1950’s sense of the Ten Commandments to a total absence of biblical norms around obedience.

So today I find that in this gospel, Mary’s simple ‘yes’ to the angel Gabriel offers a new approach to this jaded word, ‘obedience’. As Mary listens to the angel speak, something extraordinary is at work within her. She sidesteps the dozens of questions that have been filling her mind, and instead opens up her heart. And it is here that God’s word enters and Mary pushes past the questions in her head and instead is galvanized by the love she encounters in her heart.

Theologian Paul Tillich described it like this: “Obedience of faith” … is the act of keeping ourselves open to the Spiritual Presence which has grasped us and opened us. It is obedience by participation and not by submission.”² Madeline L’Engle (Leng-gle) further explores this concept: “Mary did not always understand. But one does not have to understand to be obedient. Instead of understanding – that intellectual understanding which we are so fond of – there is a feeling of rightness, of knowing, knowing things which we are not yet able to understand.”³

Mary pondered the words. Which means she had heard them. She was listening. She listening deeply enough to bypass the questions in her head about all the who, what, why, and when. Listening more within, she hears what she needs to hear, and says, ‘Here I am. Let it be with me.’. With me. Her yes. Her participation. Her willingness. Which she can give because she trusts what she hears. As Jen Richardson notes, “Obedience asks that we give ourselves to what can be trusted: a person, a community, a practice, a way of life.”⁴ For Mary, it was God.

Where do we find this type of listening in our busy, complicated, changing world? Esther de Waal writes that the “word ‘obedience’ is derived from the Latin *oboedire*, which shares its

¹https://takeaction.amnesty.ca/page/40318/action/1?utm_medium=email&utm_source=engagingnetworks&utm_campaign=Nasrin_nonsigners+Dec2020&utm_content=Nasrin+update++eactivist+nonsigners+-+Dec2020+A&ea.url.id=5073518&forwarded=true

² Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology: Volume Three* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1963), 132.

³ Jan L. Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women: A Companion for Reflection & Prayer* (Nashville: Upper Room Books, 2010), 252.

⁴ Richardson, *In the Sanctuary of Women*, 253.

roots with *audire*, to hear. So, to obey really means to hear and then act upon what we have heard.”⁵ Perhaps this is the time for a *re-na-sance* of the word ‘obedience,’ where obedience accompanies a spiritual longing to open up my heart to hear the words that God speaks to me. So that Mary, my heart bends towards God.

The birth of Jesus in the manger is a moment that enters our hearts, because of the night, because of the carols, because of the candles, because of the beauty of the story, because the heart is hungering for this sign of hope. “How silently! How silently, the wondrous gift is given – so God imparts to human hearts the blessed gift of heaven.”⁶

Mary bent her head and listened within. And there was no denying what she heard. A voice so filled with love for her, a voice that she could trust. And she lifted her head, and without waiting another second, she answered the angel who stood waiting.

Yeah. I'm in.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Esther de Waal, *Seeking God: The Way of St. Benedict* (Norwich, Canterbury Press, 1999), 27.

⁶ O Little Town of Bethlehem, VU 64, Vs. 3, Voices United, the United Church of Canada Hymnal.