

Let It Be
Presentation Sunday, November 19, 2023, 10:00 a.m.
All Saints Church, Pasadena
The Rev. Mike Kinman

Hear the Gospel according to Paul McCartney

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

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

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There are some songs that just break open my heart of longing ... and Let it Be is one of them.

I find more often than not, it's a song that brings tears. Because it sings of a peace, it sings of a release that I long for so deeply.

Whisper words of wisdom
There will be an answer
Shine until tomorrow

Let it be.

For Paul McCartney, the wisdom came a dream he had during the sessions recording the White Album and he had a sense that the band was starting to come apart. And in this dream his mother Mary, who had died of an embolism following surgery for breast cancer when he was 14, came to him. Later he told his biographer:

“It was so great to see her because that’s a wonderful thing about dreams: you actually are reunited with that person for a second; there they are and you appear to both be physically together again. It was so wonderful for me and she was very reassuring. In the dream she said, ‘It’ll be all right.’ I’m not sure if she used the words ‘Let it be’ but that was the gist of her advice. It was, ‘Don’t worry too much, it will turn out OK.’ It was such a sweet dream I woke up thinking, ‘Oh, it was really great to visit with her again.’ I felt very blessed to have that dream. So that got me writing the song ‘Let It Be.’”

It's not a unique sentiment or song.

For Paul McCartney it was his mother whispering.

For Bob Marley it was three little birds pitch by his doorstep singing sweet songs of melodies pure and true. Singing

"This is my message to you-ou-ou."

"Don't worry about a thing.

"Cause every little thing is gonna be all right."

"Singing Don't worry about a thing,

"Cause every little thing is gonna be all right."

I find myself with these longs a lot lately.

The news is relentless.

Life is relentless.

Loss sometimes feels relentless.

I have had to ration my news intake. I read the Times in the morning or listen to NPR so I can keep up with what is happening in the world, but then I have to stop. If something big happens during the day I trust that there will be no shortage of people who will be eager to tell me about it. And I'm grateful for that. Because I need to ... I believe we all need to be aware of what is going on.

And if it were just being informed it would be one thing, but news ... particularly bad news, particularly news of conflict and tragedy is actively marketed to us in ways that cultivate and feed an addiction to it. Marketed to us in ways that do not make us feel equipped to come together to deal with it but rather in ways that both polarize us against one another in the face of it and tempt us to increasing hopelessness that anything good can proceed from it.

Some of this is the ubiquity of social and electronic media. We are literally ingesting thousands of messages a day and it can be as toxic as drinking poison, luring us into a bipolarity of righteous anger and exhausted despair. And the temptation can be to go all in into either one of those extremes.

And there needs to be room for that. Because our anger is natural ... and so is our despair. Dig a little underneath them and you will find the pain and sadness and fear that I believe almost all of us are carrying. A disquiet follows our souls ... or at least it follows mine. And that's because the world we live in is disquieting to say the least.

And sometimes ... sometimes more than sometimes ... it just is all too much.

And so, I long for Bob Marley's words to be true ... that every little thing is going to be all right.

And so, I long for Paul McCartney's words to be true ... there will be an answer, Let it Be.

And I flee to the psalm we prayed this morning.

"God is for us a refuge and strength, a help in trouble, easily found.

Therefore we shall not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains quiver in the heart of the sea."

My first memory of this psalm was when I was just out of college in the early 90s and, after my friend Steve had died of AIDS, I had begun a weekly prayer service for healing in the time of AIDS at Calvary Episcopal Church in Columbia, Missouri. I got some resources from the National Episcopal AIDS Coalition and every Monday at 5 pm for months I would sit in the church sanctuary and pray the service by myself because only twice did anyone ever show up. In fact, the complaints the rector got about the church having the service far outpaced the number of people who showed up to pray.

I had two lasting takeaways from that weekly experience of praying alone in the church.

The first was psalm 46. There was something powerful about hearing those words echo in that empty church. While the world roared around me. While people suffered and died in silence with churches not even willing to bury them. While the first gulf war raged and Anita Hill was eviscerated by the Senate Judiciary Committee, week after week I clung to these words, now translated anew by Dr. Wil Gafney:

God is for us a refuge and strength, a help in trouble, easily found.

Therefore we shall not fear, though the earth should change, though the mountains quiver in the heart of the sea;

its waters roar and churn, the mountains tremble with its swell.

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy habitation of the Most High.

God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved; God will help her when the morning unfurls.

The nations roar, dominions quiver; God puts forth her voice, the earth melts.

I have come back to these words time and again over the past 30 years. They have been a touchstone for me in moments where I am tempted to despair.

In times in my life when I have felt most alone ... even more alone than that young 22 year old praying in the corner of a dark church ... these words have been my comfort. My very present help in trouble.

A few years ago, I was looking at different Hebrew translations of this psalm and I came upon one that struck a chord deep inside.

For verse 11, perhaps the most famous verse in the psalm, which Dr. Gafney translates – along with just about everyone else – as “be still and know that I am God,” this Hebrew translator instead wrote “Let it be, and know that I am God.”

I thought about this a few weeks ago when Robin and I were at Shabbat services at Leo Baeck Temple and their rabbi, our dear friend, Ken Chasen, introduced a song called Lu Yehi, that was written while Israel was being attacked in the Yom Kippur War of 1973. Lu Yehi means “may it be” and Naomi Shermer wrote it much like the psalmist did in response to a time of unspeakable horror.

One verse goes like this:

If the messenger is at the door
Put a kind word in his mouth
All that we seek ... may it be.

The messenger refers to the iconic and life-shattering experience that some of you in this room have known ... of a knock on the door and someone in a military uniform appearing to inform you that your child, sibling, spouse or parent was dead.

That verse was so painful it was often omitted in performances of the song because the messenger never came bearing kind words.

And yet the longing was real.

Please God, let it not be so.
Please God, let it be different.
Please God, let them be alive.

The longing is eternal.

Please God, no.

It is older than the psalms and fresher on our ears than McCartney and Marley.

Please, God ... no.
Please, God ... help.

The language of the psalm is almost romantic in its poetry.

“God is for us a refuge and strength, a help in trouble, easily found.”

God, you are my safe place.

If we have a person who is a safe place for us we know how powerful the enclosure of their arms and the love without judgment of their presence can be.

If we don't have such a person, or if we had one once and we have lost them, the yawning chasm that leaves speaks for itself.

And yet the psalmist is singing that God is there
 God is always there.
 A refuge in strength
 A help in trouble, easily found.

"Let it be, and know that I am God," the psalmist sings.

It is not a call to disengagement.

It is not a call to stop our praying and working without ceasing to achieve what our Jewish siblings call Tikkun Olam, the repair of the world.

It is a proclamation of the second lesson I learned from my Monday evenings alone praying this psalm in the church.

That showing up ... matters.

That faithfully proclaiming truth ... matters.

That standing up for love even ... perhaps especially when you are doing it by yourself ... matters.

That showing up matters ... and that God always shows up with us.

Let it be and know that I am God reminds me that whatever the situation, it is not up to me or to us to fix it or to even understand it. It is up to me, it is up to us to be faithful and to trust in the power of the love that is God.

It is up to me, it is up to us ... to show up and speak our truth.

It is up to me, it is up to us ... to listen deeply to each other and loyally, steadfastly remain with each other in the pain that happens when the "waters roar and churn (and) the mountains tremble with its swell." Because that is where God lives, waiting for us and standing with us.

I am gradually learning that "be still and know that I am God."
 That "God is my refuge, my strength, my safe place."

That “let it be” is not about disengagement from the tragedies and troubles of the world but about fierce engagement ... and it is about engagement that is about showing up and being faithful, not engagement that believes I or we are responsible for any specific result.

Thich Nhat Hahn puts it so powerfully when he writes:

“Letting go gives us freedom. And freedom is the only condition for happiness. If, in our heart, we still cling to anything – anger, anxiety, or possessions – we cannot be free.”

Over the past several weeks, I have been spending a lot of time with Ken Chasen ... and I will tell you a more faithful, loving leader of a congregation you will never find. We find ourselves on opposite sides of a call for a ceasefire in Gaza ... mostly because we differ on whether it will achieve what we both desire ... a life of justice that leads to peace for both Palestinians and Israelis. And I am deeply grateful that we have such wonderful friends and partners like Ken and Rabbi Sharon Brous at IKAR where we can disagree on this point and still be deeply committed to standing with one another in love and holding each other in our pain ... and Israeli’s, Jews, Palestinians, Muslims, Christians ... are all in such pain right now.

In part of our conversation that became one of his sermons ... or perhaps a part of his sermon that he inserted in our conversation ... he asked me

“Do you believe that there is any realistic hope that either Hamas or the IDF, much less both, will actually do what you are calling upon them to do? I understand how it might feel satisfying to the conscience to call for no more war, but if there is no chance whatsoever that either warring party would even consider what you are demanding, what is the moral import of a call for something that we know is not going to happen – beyond helping the person making the call to feel relief from their agony over what they are and will continue to be seeing?”

I answered him that I did believe there was a realistic hope for a ceasefire, but even if there wasn’t, I believe there is a point to not remaining silent, to speaking the truth of calling for the kind of justice that leads to peace and the kind of peace that allows space for justice to emerge.

I spent much of Wednesday afternoon and evening sitting in the intersection of Hollywood and Highland with Jewish Voices for Peace and If Not Now calling for a ceasefire in Palestine. And someone I love and trust deeply, this week told me that “not one child is going to be saved in Gaza by you doing that” and so my time would have better been spent on other things.

And from a pragmatic standpoint, I understand what she was talking about. 200 people blocking an intersection in Los Angeles seems like it has no chance on moving the needle on getting a ceasefire a half a world away – and there were other responsibilities I had. One person choosing whether or not to be there ... the difference of 199 or 200 people seems the definition of inconsequential. I completely understand how it feels that way and how it can even feel like it is self indulgent to take time to do that.

And ... this is who we are. We are people who take vows to strive for justice and peace and respect the dignity of every human being. We don't take vows to achieve that throughout the world ... and we do take vows to try.

We take vows about the effort .. not about the result ... because truthfully the result is most often out of our hands.

Be still and know that I am God.
Every little thing is going to be all right
Let it be.

These are calls for us to show up. To be people of hope in the midst of despair. To be people of love and reconciliation in the midst of hate and polarization.

To hold onto each other.
To hold onto each other tightly, fiercely and lovingly.
To hold onto each other in trust that the love that binds us together can not only heal us but can heal the world.

In a few minutes we are going to invite you to come forward to put your pledge for 2024 on this table. And a pledge, like so much of what we offer, is but a symbol of something larger. Your pledge ... our pledges are sign and symbol of your whole life. And that is the dream .. that your, mine, our whole lives will find the kind of liberation that comes from giving them away in love.

We have so little control over the results of our actions ... and we have incredible control over what actions we offer.

We are not hopeless and helpless. We are the light of the world and the power of love.

You ... are the light of the world and the power of love.

That is not responsibility so much as it is opportunity.

Opportunity to make our lives extraordinary by trusting the ever-present power of God's love working in us and through us.

Whisper words of wisdom
There will be an answer
Shine until tomorrow

Let it be.

Amen.