

CMCL
December 3, 2017
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When your worship committee sat down, months ago, to look at themes for our worship together here at CMCL we found ourselves drawn to the theme you see printed on your bulletin cover: "Yes! Let it Be!" As the image on the bulletin implies, this is from the story of Mary, in celebration of her radical willingness to say "Yes" to carrying the incarnation of God into this world in the form of an infant she would carry in her own body. She was saying Yes to being the mother of the Messiah, and to a controversial and scandalous pregnancy. I will say that Mary's story has been a hard one to ponder in a season where sexual misconduct and sexual assault are being publicly called out daily.

But what does it mean to celebrate the supposed consent of a teenage girl to a messenger of the Lord? In the statutory sense of the word – can we say that Mary was able to give consent at all to one so much more powerful than herself in almost every way? In the words of contemporary womanist theologian, Wil Gafney, "did Mary say #metoo? "Sit with me in this moment," she writes, "this uncomfortable moment, before rushing to find proof of her consent, or argue that contemporary notions of consent do not apply to ancient texts ... Hold those thoughts & just sit in the moment with this young woman." It is a remarkable account in many ways: "Even in the Iron Age in an androcentric and patriarchal culture, [Mary seems to know] her body belongs to her. She doesn't ask what her intended will say, what her father will say, what about the shame this would likely bring on her, her family, and their name. "In a world which did not necessarily recognize her sole ownership of her body and did not understand our notions of consent and rape, this very young woman had the dignity, courage and temerity to question a messenger of the Living God about what would happen to her body *before* giving her consent. That is important. That gets lost when we rush to her capitulation. Before Mary said, 'yes,' she said, 'wait a minute, explain this to me.'" As the story goes, she says she got enough of an answer, to famously say: "Let it be with me according to your word." And I wonder, how is it possible to honor Mary's amazing courage and volition while not holding this story up as an example of underage consent? If the consent that Mary gave is the consent of someone with much less choice in the matter than we who seek, from 2000 years' distance, to challenge ourselves to the same radical consent, maybe we need to see this story through a different lens.

This past week, I have found myself companioned by a different text, written by a different woman in a different time, but one who was also with child, one also facing a decision about how to care for a new life, entrusted to her and wanting to say a faithful, genuine yes, a yes that required the exploration of some questions before an answer could be given. This woman is Gayle Boss, the author of *All Creation Waits*, from which our Advent Wreath reading was taken. She writes about the inspiration for the book, which is daily Advent readings about animals: It came about when she was the mother of a toddler, with another baby on the way. She was yearning for a faith practice to sustain her during the weeks of Advent, a season where she found her own spirit considerably out of line with the "Christmas spirit" of consumption and forced gaiety. **"I looked for [an Advent calendar]**

that would, like fasting, giving away, and praying, **help us enjoin earth's seasonal rhythm ... I was looking for [something] ... less about Christ's human birth and more about the need for that birth.** I wanted my little boy, opening each door, to sense that Advent is about darkness—and hope, fear—and hope, loss—and hope.”

She describes reading “a few paragraphs in a rather dry tome on the history of Christian liturgy. Those paragraphs worked in me like fingers lining up the cylinders of a lock. I still remember the *click* when that internal lock popped open,” she writes. “I learned that the roots of Advent run deep beneath the Christian church - in the earth and its seasons. Late autumn, in the northern hemisphere, brings the end of the growing season. When early agricultural peoples had harvested their crops and stacked food in their larders, they gave a collective sigh of relief. Their long days in the fields were over. For their labor they had heaps of fruits, vegetables, grains and meat. The group body called out, *Feast!*”

At the same time, no matter how glad the party, they couldn't keep from glancing at the sky. Their growing season was over because the sun had retreated too far south to keep the crops alive. Each day throughout the fall they watched the light dwindle, felt the warmth weaken. It made them anxious, edgy. Their fires were no substitute for the sun. When they had eaten up the crop they were feasting on, how would another crop grow? Throughout December, as the sun sank and sank to its lowest point on their horizon, they felt the shadow of primal fear—fear for survival—crouching over them. They were feasting, and they were fearful, both. Yes, last year the sun had returned to their sky. ***But what if, this year, it didn't?*** Despite their collective memory, [even] people wedded, bodily, to the earth couldn't help asking the question. Their bodies, in the present tense, asked the question.

Our bodies still ask that question. In December the dark and cold deepen, and our rational minds dismiss it as nothing. We *know* that on December 21, the winter solstice, the sun will begin its return to our sky. But our animal bodies react with dis-ease. We feel, *The light—life—is going...* Some of us cope by seizing distractions... shopping, parties, more shopping.-To be sure, some part of “the holiday season” is celebration of the harvest, for us, as it was for our ancestors, even if our personal harvest doesn't involve crops and barns. We throw a party to mark the end of another year and all it's brought... But for us also, as for our ancestors, the dark end of the year brings unrest. It is an end. It comes without our asking and makes plain how little of life's course we control... We feel weighted, gloomy even, and we feel guilty because voices everywhere in myriad ways sing out, “It's the Most Wonderful Time of the Year.

”The church history book that got hold of me told me that my own annual December sadness was no reason for guilt. It was a sign of being wide-awake in the world, awake enough to sense loss. And furthermore, there was a way to engage that sadness. That way was Advent. The early Fathers of the Christian church read the ebbing of light and heat and vegetable life each year as a foreshadowing of the time when life as we know it will end completely. That it will end is the rock-bottom truth we sense deep in our primal bones every December, and it rightly terrifies us. To their and our abiding fear of a dark ending, the church spoke of an *adventus*: a coming. Faith proclaimed, *When life as we know it goes, this year and at the end of all years, One comes, and comes bringing a new beginning.*

Advent, to the Church Fathers, was the right naming of the season when light and life are fading. They urged the faithful to set aside four weeks to fast, give, and pray— all ways to strip down, to let the bared soul recall what it knows beneath its fear of the dark, to know what Jesus called “the one thing necessary”: that there is One who is the source of all life. One who comes to be *with* us and *in* us, even, especially, in darkness and death. One who brings a new beginning.

This is Christian tradition at its best, moving in step with creation. When the sun’s light and heat wane, the natural world lets lushness fall away. It strips down. All energy is directed to the essentials that ensure survival. Engaging in Advent’s stripping practices— fasting, giving away, praying—we tune into the rhythms humming in the cells of all creatures living in the northern hemisphere. We tune into our own essential rhythms.” These creatures became Boss’s inspiration, for a different kind of consent, to a different kind of season. **Looking at the ways of creatures, “showed, for her, how a healthy soul responds to encroaching darkness. And [that] there’s more than one response.**

There’s the [painted] turtle response, (as we heard earlier) the loon response, black bear’s response. . . . When that primal fear of the dark—of the end— begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer *un*-fearful responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in amazing and ingenious ways. They shape themselves to life as it is given. Each in its way says: *The dark is not an end, but a door. This is the way a new beginning comes.* The practice of Advent has always been about helping us to grasp the mystery of a new beginning out of what looks like death.” And I think again of Mary, and think maybe the story of her consent is about her consent to that life that simply *will* be born in her, even if it means the death of her dreams of marriage and respectability. How she responds to the fact of new life within her, regardless of the justice of the situation, with her whole body, mind, spirit and strength. The evidence of the robust health of her soul, which we witness in her choices in response to an impossible situation.

Later in Luke, we read of Simeon’s blessing of baby Jesus, naming him as the long-awaited Messiah and acknowledging to Mary that even as her son is destined for the falling and rising of many in Israel, a sword will pierce her own soul, in grief for this beloved son. I think we know this ... even as we know what we need to do to survive the time of darkness between harvests each year ... we know that every yes to life, is a yes to uncertainty and complexity. Every yes to life is a yes to light and dark, night and day. It is a yes to imminent birth and eventual death. It is a yes to fullness and loss, ecstasy and grief. And yet we, like Mary, are invited to say yes, let it be so with me, too. To be part of the cycle of life, even though my soul be inevitably pierced with sorrow, to say yes to the particular life I carry within me, to seeing it combined with divine Love into something new and alive.

How might we free ourselves, creatures that we are, to also “unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer *un*-fearful responses.” To take in both the invitation to new life, “and the threat of dark and cold, and adapt [ourselves] in amazing and ingenious ways. How might we “shape [our]selves to life as it is given” us? Yes! Let it be so.

This Advent, our wreath and our way will be lighted each Sunday by stories about animals - stories less about Christ's birth, and more about the *need* for that birth. Reading an excerpt from the introduction to the book of animal readings we'll be reading: Why do we look to animals at Advent? When that primal fear of the dark—of the end— begins to slide over us, animals unselfconsciously and forthrightly offer unfearful responses. They take in the threat of dark and cold, and they adapt in amazing and ingenious ways. They shape themselves to life as it is given. Each in its way says: *The dark is not an end, but a door. This is the way a new beginning comes.* The practice of Advent has always been about helping us to grasp the mystery of a new beginning out of what looks like death. Other-than-human-creatures—sprung, like us, from the Source of Life—manifest this mystery without question or doubt. They can be our guides. They can be to us “a book about God . . . a word of God,” the God who comes, even in the darkest season, to bring us a new beginning. And now we light our first Advent candle, and hear the story of the painted turtle.