

**BROADWAY CHRISTIAN CHURCH • COLUMBIA, MISSOURI**

**THE WORSHIP OF GOD • DECEMBER 20, 2020**

**THE FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT**

***“NOT SO FAR”***

**The Scripture**

**Luke 1:26-38**

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." Then the angel departed from her.*

**The Message**

***Not So Far: Love***

**Mark Briley**



Each new day that we show up to life feels like a victory. It's dark right now... literally. The longest night of the year will be tomorrow night – the Winter Solstice. Late dawn. Early sunset. Short day. Long night. We'll have less daylight tomorrow than any we've had this year. And before we blame it all again on 2020m this happens every year. It just seems like another cruel joke this year is playing on us. The December solstice is actually a single moment in time each year. The moment occurs when the sun reaches

its southernmost point in the sky. It happens tomorrow at 4:02 a.m. Central Standard Time. For us in the northern hemisphere, it is the very moment of the year that we are furthest from the sun. We'll have 9 hours, 26 minutes, and 2 seconds of sunlight tomorrow here in Columbia. If you live in Northern Alaska, you will have zero hours of sunlight tomorrow. Thanks again, 2020.

It struck me this year more than most... that the darkness seems to be crowding us out these blasted pandemic'd days more than ever. Our very part of the planet is leaning away from the sun right now more than we have all year long. And that seems like a burdened metaphor. Especially on Love Sunday, the final Sunday before Christmas, a time when we should be leaning into the mysterious joy of the coming of Christ. But, say it with me, "*Thanks again, 2020!*"

It is truly unreal. So many people we love right now... sick with COVID, ill with heartbreak, suffering from the mental health beat down of the year. You name it, our loved ones are in the throes of it right now. And we're all dealing with it in different ways. Some are throwing up their hands as if to give up the fight. Some of us are eating through the stress... like the can of Toffee-ettes I recently popped open to sample one which turned into an entire can-sized sample. Some are bunkering down, and others are virtually retail shopping like never before. I read a meme a friend posted



I have ordered so much stuff, I don't even know what's happening anymore. If UPS shows up with a llama tomorrow, it is what it is.

@TINALIKESWHAT

this week that said, "*I have ordered so much stuff, I don't even know what's happening anymore. If UPS shows up with a llama tomorrow, it is what it is.*"

It is what it is. Do you use this phrase? It is what it is? I do sometimes, but I try to catch myself when I do. It is such a phrase of resignation. *It is what it is.* Nothing I can do. No way out. Nothing can change what is; it just is what it is. Maybe you feel that way about COVID right now. I certainly understand that.

But we get a different word from a teenager today. Mary gets this "*Thanks 2020*" news drop in the form of an angel. "*You're going to have a baby, Mary.*" She could have said, "*It is what it is,*" a mere acceptance of something happening to her, but she offers another word... a subtle difference you could argue, but I'm not so sure it's all that subtle. She says, "*Let it be... let it be with me according to your word.*" Maybe she had the old Beatles track, "*Let it Be*" playing in the background when Gabriel popped in her room, and that was on her mind. But I think it's more than that. I think this brave, courageous, teenager says, "*I will hold you to this promise.*" "*May it be with me as you name it now.*" It's an emphatic, "*Amen!*" which literally means "*May it be so.*" Let's do this! That's a very different tone than "*It is what it is.*" That's love's committed fight. I'm in it with you.

It's a word the Kindred Collective once shared which said, "A shoutout to everyone who is trying right now... trying to do the right thing. Trying to stay open. Trying to keep going. Trying to hold on. Trying to let go. Trying to find their flow. Trying to stay afloat. Trying to meet each new day. Trying to find their balance. Trying to love themselves. Trying new things and new ways. I see you. I'm there, too. We're in this together."

We really need more of this right now. And it *is* Love's highest call... to say we're in this together. I know we're COVID weary. I've got a thing or two I'd take up with COVID if our paths crossed in a dark alley. It's a killer. Not only taking lives of those we love, but it's putting it's press on all aspects of our lives. I've had teary conversations with friends whose marriages are struggling. I've had prayerful conversations with those whose jobs are turning upside down. A friend said to me that his middle schooler looked up from his computer during virtual school and said, "Hey Papa. How's your mid-life crisis going?" It was a joke... we think... maybe.

I've fielded calls and messages from dear ones in our midst, who are saying, "It's come to our home. It's hitting us hard." And I've felt that tinge of feeling from so many on the cusp of saying, "It is what it is."

It's the darkest day of the year. The sun is as far away from us as possible, and it's that burning star in the sky; sun, yes, but I sense it in their hearts. They wonder if the distance they are drowning in right now is the Son of God. And in the midst of this darkness, I hear in my beloved colleagues voice, "Come on, Jesus!" And maybe you're there... in that place... right now. It's touch and go. It's all on the edge. It's all chips on the table. "It is what it is?" or "Let it be with me according to your word... according to your promise." How is it with you?

I lost our family Christmas cookie-decorating contest this week. Dead last. Anonymous entries put before a virtual panel of judges were unanimous. Thanks, 2020. It didn't start out as a contest, but there's a bit of a competitive streak in the Briley five so... well... contest. I soon realized I was not operating out of my giftedness, and I was going to have to rise to the challenge. You be the judge. I've seen better but dead last? It's okay. All evidence was quickly consumed, and we've moved forward.

Scripture says, "the last shall be first." A little levity can help us refocus. As I stand here today – in the darkness of these days – literally and figuratively as it is, I've got my heart and eyes turned toward the manger. "Come on, Jesus. Come on."



That's Mary's tone. And I know it's hard to tell tone in an ancient written word told in the third person, but I see this brave soul in Mary. Despite all the "yeah buts" and "what ifs" she says, "Let it be. Come on, Jesus." This is why we're going to raise the candles high on Thursday night, Lord willing, and the COVID don't rise. We need the Light to pierce the darkness again. You raise your light, and I raise mine, and we say across even a cold parking lot, "May God's promise be true again and again. Let it be."

It's the reminder that Christ is not so far after all. And it only takes a spark, right? That may be enough to help us build on the growing light of each new day beyond tomorrow to get us all through. Mary says, "Here I am... ready to serve. Let it be." Mary's got this grit about her that I can't help but respect.

Grit is a word you may not like all that much. Maybe you do. When it comes to faith, "Grace" is the G word we flock to and thank God for it. But in this passage, in all we know about Mary moving forward... I'm grateful for her gritty faith. It's persistent. She gets some life altering news, but she doesn't cave with an *it-is-what-it-is* mentality. She's uncertain of the path forward but nevertheless, she persisted.

One of our best friends sent Carrie some flowers for her birthday. Our friend, as an Enneagram Four, for those for whom that illuminates some things, these weren't just any flowers. It was from the most unique entrepreneurs' flower business out of



California. It came with this lapel pin and the founder's story about the most rewarding and most difficult thing she has ever done. The back of this card says, "With any endeavor I think it's easy to focus on the successes—the growth, the recognition, the not running out of money. The most important thing I've done though since starting this company is to learn to bounce back. There are millions of things that can knock you down in a given day, and most of them you never even see coming. All the lessons (and humility!)

learned from these obstacles doesn't mean a thing though if you don't get back up – and get back up again. What's the secret to the bounce back? An amazing team, and family and friends help, but in my experience, it comes down to grit. The dictionary defines grit as "indomitable spirit."<sup>1</sup> She goes on to describe what this has looked like for her in the flower business.

Mary's gritty faith – her indomitable spirit – comes to life in this the most rewarding and difficult thing she will ever do. *Let it be. Bring on the promise as you name it.* And Love? Well... it has that same gritty quality about it.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://farmgirlflowers.com/>

Where do you need a little grit right now? Where do you need to dig deep? And if you've got it in you, how can you share it with some who are hurting right now, who can only hang onto grace for all it's worth? Could you share some grit? With your friend who is thinking about giving up... could you share some grit? With your spouse who has hit an emotional roadblock... could you offer a little grit? With the one who lives alone who is lonely and anxious... could you share some grit? With the decision makers who are fielding calls and emails and text after text with judgments about their leadership and wondering how to press forward next... could you grit up beside them and say, "*You're not alone in this effort.*"

Mary carries the weightiest responsibility of all, and she turns from her pray-worn knees in this encounter with some choices to make. One choice? *It is what it is.* It's a choice of no partnership. It's a choice of resignation. Another choice? *Let it be.* May your promise be legit. Let me do my part.

Alexander Campbell, the 19<sup>th</sup>- century founder of our denominational movement called the Christian Church (*Disciples of Christ*), said,

*"To get on your knees and pray for anything that you will not then stand up and work for is an insult to God and a disappointment to yourself."*

Mary surely had some uncertain moments ... we all do... but she also stepped forward from that moment knowing that every day forward was a day with more light than the day before... a day closer to meeting Jesus... a day closer to the fulfillment of the promise.

This week is a microcosm of that promise in our lives. Of all that we are surviving and pressing through in 2020, we stand just days away from Christmas. And we need it. We've waited... as Advent suggests we must... but it's near.

I'm getting to know you, Broadway, more and more. There's plenty of grace in our collective faith but there's grit, too. More than 60 years, and those founding faithful who would never say, "*It is what it is,*" said "*Let it be with us according to your promise.*" And we're still going... on our knees in prayer and off our knees to work with God for justice in the world, to make room for people for whom the church has often rejected, to stand alongside each other on the darkest days to say, the darkness will not prevail. It will not overcome us. Our staff team... grit and grace. Such heart this group. A new challenge comes, and they say, "*We got this.*" And we rise together. This is Mary's spirit, and she's calling us, inviting us, leading us to Christmas again. And I, for one, can't wait to be with you on Thursday night.

And there will be tears of joy and tears of grief and those who belt out “*all is calm, all is bright*” and those who can only raise that light with a lump in their throat as we see again... across our parking lot... that Christ has come... and that Christ is still coming to the world... even now... even in the mess of all that we know in the here and now, we’ll say, “*Thank you. Let it be.*” “*For reminding us that no matter how bad it seems... even in the shortest days and the darkest nights... Jesus is not so far... thank you 2020 for reminding us of our resiliency. Thank you, God, for showing up on Christmas Day, and every day...*”

**Song of Response**  
**“Let It Be According to Your Word”**  
**Words and Music: Ed Varnum**

1. Thank you, our God, for so great a love  
that you gave the world your Son.  
I open my heart to this gift of grace  
you offer to everyone.

*Refrain*

Like Mary who said, “Yes. Let it be,”  
Please share your gift of love through me.  
I am your servant. You’ve spoken, I’ve heard.  
Let it be according to your word.

2. You sent an angel to your servant, Mary,  
in Nazareth of Galilee  
to carry your love into the world.  
She said, “Yes. Let it be.”

*Refrain*

Like Mary who said, “Yes. Let it be,”  
Please share your gift of love through me.  
I am your servant. You’ve spoken, I’ve heard.  
Let it be according to your word.

3. I want to carry your love to the world,  
bring Jesus in all I do,  
receiving your love, transforming my life,  
and living this life made new.

*Refrain*

Like Mary who said, “Yes. Let it be,”  
Please share your gift of love through me.  
I am your servant. You’ve spoken, I’ve heard.  
Let it be according to your word.