

## ***All Will be Well***

2 Samuel 7: 1-11, 16; Luke 1: 26-38

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### **I. Introduction**

During the high Middle Ages, a form of monasticism developed called anchorism. An anchorite is a Greek word for someone who has turned away from the world, one who is retired from the world. And anchorites in the Middle Ages were folks that would attach themselves to a local church physically, they would build a small cell on the outside wall of the church and they'd live there next to the church and spend a life in prayer and study. So, if we had an anchorite here, there would be a little hole in the wall of the church where they would listen to the sermon, they had to, and through which they'd receive communion and through which they'd actually receive their food because they never left their cell. They spent their whole life in prayer attached to a church.

Okay. You're looking at me with a little bit of disbelief. This was a thing. This actually happened. And these folks were all over Europe. The most famous anchorist is actually a woman though we don't know her name at all. We know her from her writings. We assume that she was from a fairly affluent family because she could write well. But basically we don't know anything about her. We don't know when she became an anchorite, if she was widowed because the plague was rampant at that point, if she never married at all. And we call her actually by the name of the church that she was attached to. She went to her local church which was the church of St. Julian in the city of Norwich which was the second biggest town in England at that point, and so, we just call her Julian of Norwich because that's all we've got. So, if any of you were curious when we're hearing those amazing words of the mystics last week that Pat House assembled for that drama, if you noticed that Ellie Dawson as reading words of someone named Julian and you got to wondering why she was reading a man's stuff,

it's because Julian was a woman. We call her Julian of Norwich because that was the church that she was attached to.

So, we've been spending this Advent reflecting on the lives of the mystics as we work through these wonderful, well-worn scriptures as we prepare ourselves for the coming of Christ again. And Julian is a really great voice to hear today as the scriptures talk about Mary and Mary's call to receive the Christ Child. On the last Sunday in Advent, the Scriptures are always focused on Mary, and today we heard those wonderful words of the Angel Gabriel calling Mary to this event. Mary and Julian I think have some very helpful wisdom to offer us as we prepare ourselves for receiving the Christ Child again.

## **II. Pondering**

The first thing that I want to hold up for Mary, and Mary speaks only three times in this passage as you have heard, and that's great if you're trying to do a three-point sermon, it's easy. And the first thing she does in this passage is she ponders. And that's worth noting because this is a pretty dramatic moment. I mean, she's just had this angel appear to her and say, "Hail most favored one," and what's the first thing she does? She stops to reflect a little bit.

Now, that's a helpful word for me because while I talk a lot about pondering, I do a relatively small amount of it. And I've noticed this in myself. And the higher stress the situation, the less pondering I do, and probably the more pondering I need to do. And Mary is a wonderful example of what you do in a crisis moment which is that you don't react, you stop and you think. You ponder. You reflect so that you can respond in the right way.

I noticed many times when I was traveling this summer on my Sabbatical, I'd be in Japan and I needed to get to some place, make a train at exactly the right moment, and of course I was late, and so I'd be rushing, and I'd rush in the wrong direction, because that's

what you do when you're rushing. And then I'd get later and I finally have to stop and figure out where I needed to go. Mary is stopping to figure out where she needs to go in this very brief moment. And that's a very helpful word for us, I think. And Julian models this in a powerful way.

Julian as a woman of about 30 became quite ill. We don't know what she was ill with but we know that she was bedridden and near death for about three days, and then she starts to recover over a course of the next several days. And throughout the period of her sickness and her recovery, she is given a series of very intense visions from God. She writes these down as they happen so she can remember them, but she doesn't talk about what they mean until she takes a little time to reflect, and this is why she becomes an anchorist. She goes into the cell to reflect on the revelations that God has given her.

And then, many years later, she writes a much longer version of these visions which we now call the *Revelations of Divine Love* or it's sometimes just called *The Showings*. We call it *The Showings* instead of *Revelation* because we don't want to get it mixed up with the Biblical book. So, it's widely known as *The Showings*. And there's a short version which she wrote down right when it happened -- also not a bad spiritual discipline by the way -- and then there's a longer version that she gives us after she's taken the time to reflect and ponder and to pray. And this longer text which is called *The Long Text* is one of the great classics of Christian spirituality and perhaps the greatest English written work in spirituality and mysticism. So, Julian was a wonderful model for what it looks like to ponder.

### **III. Asking**

The second thing Mary does in this passage is she asks Gabriel a question. Gabriel has just given her some sort of unusual news and she says, as Kate Payton wonderfully acted out this morning, "Stop a minute. How is this going to be since I'm a virgin? I don't understand

what you're going to say, maybe you could unpack that for me a little bit." That's a very helpful word to hear because of course Mary's essentially talking to God. She's talking to the Angel Gabriel and he's just said something she doesn't understand, so she says, "Help me understand."

Christmas is a time when we are immersed in some of the deepest mysteries of our faith. What does it mean that God becomes human? What is the significance of the word "Emanuel," God with us? How does that work? What does it mean that in this text here that Mary was a virgin?

I've talked to lots and lots of you about theology over the last several years and I don't know that I've met anybody in this church who believes in the virgin birth. There may be some of you, but I haven't spoken with you. I've spoken with lots of you who go, "While I love this powerful story, I don't think Mary was a virgin."

I'm going to suggest that maybe that's something to ask God about. We can ask God questions about things that we don't understand and God very often gives us an answer. Maybe not an immediate verbal answer, but I very rarely ask God a question and then at some point in the week following, don't have one of you mail me an essay or a blog on exactly that thing or read a scripture that starts to sort of make pieces click together or be in a conversation that helps me understand in a different kind of way. And I want to suggest that asking God questions about pieces of the faith that we don't understand is a spiritual discipline as well and a resource open to all of us.

When you read Julian's *Revelation of Divine Love*, she asked God questions all the time. So, she gets these visions, some of them are pictorial visions, some of them are theological insights, some of them are words that floated up to her much as the process of

*Lectio Divina*, but they're not all clear and so she says, "What does this mean?" And she gets some answers. Well, this is what this particular vision means.

So, as we live into this wondrous and mysterious season of Advent, I want to encourage you to take advantage of the opportunity to ask God questions, what does this -- whatever this is -- mean for me? What is the truth that you want to reveal through this passage, through this image, through this concept? And then, wait, ponder, listen, and see what the Holy Spirit raises up for you. God has something to say to you in that, so listen.

#### **IV. Accepting**

Mary's last words in this wondrous passage are, "Let it be. Whatever's coming, I don't understand all of it, I don't know --" and how can she? She's 13 or 14 years old. How can she understand what parenthood is going to be like, what raising Jesus is going to be like, what it's going to be like to lose a son to a Roman execution? She can't know any of that. She's a teenager. But she says essentially, "I trust that whatever is going to come is going to be according to your will and that it is all going to work out okay."

Julian's writing is all about trusting in the grace and mercy of God, a God who loves us so passionately that Julian says the closest human analogy we can have is that of a mother caring for a child. That doesn't even get at it but that's the closest we can get at it in terms of analogy of what that relationship is like. And Julian is really interesting in that she talks mostly about Christ as the mother, Jesus as the mother, which is a wonderful sort of juxtaposition of the gender roles, but she says essentially the father portion of the Trinity is the one who sets the direction, because that's what fathers did in her day. The mother is the one who rolls up her sleeves and does the actual work, and that's what Jesus is about. Jesus is about God rolling up God's sleeves and getting down in the trenches with us. And that's what

motherhood is about. And Julian's point is you can always trust your mom. Your dad may have temper issues. My daughter's waving to me. But you can always trust your mom.

Julian says, "The mother may sometimes suffer the child to fall and to be distressed in various ways for its own benefit but she can never suffer any kind of peril to come to her child because of her great love." So, Julian's not saying everything is going to be easy because sometimes our mothers let us learn from our mistakes. Amen? But they never let us come into any real danger. That's what God is like for Julian. This wondrous mother who loves us so passionately that while she'll let us learn, she's never going to let us come to any ultimate harm. This is at the root of Julian's most famous quote which is that God tells her, "All shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well." You may be in all kinds of crisis, you may have lost loved ones, you may have lost a job, you may be experiencing physical pain and struggle. In the midst of all of that, God's gentle promise is that all will be well and that you can trust that. "Let it be to me according to your word."

## **V. Conclusion**

So, our scripture passage today is about God as a mother calling a mother to give birth to a mother, a mother who calls each of us to likewise become a mother and give birth to the Christ in our lives every single day.

Amen.