

**SLD12.18.11 Fourth Advent**  
**Luke 1: 26-38**  
**Emory Presbyterian Church**  
**Jill Oglesby Evans**

**“Go With the Flow”**

This sermon is about surrender. You know, giving up. Giving in. Letting go. Surrendering. None of which has very positive connotations in our day.

In fact, most of us work very hard at not giving up. I know I do. Not only does hope continually spring eternal in the “can do” breast, but so does our “try, try again,” “you can’t beat me,” “I’m tougher than I look” dominating attitude. Why, giving up practically seems...un-American.

And giving in? As to an argument, or a child’s whining, or some personal craving? Why, that means you’ve *lost* ... the debate, or the parenting principle, or your self-respect for them moment.

And surrendering? Why, that’s what Japan did on the U.S.S. Missouri, what Lee did at Appomattox, what Napoleon did at Waterloo. When they *lost* their battles.

And who of us is into losing? .

Surrendering, giving up, giving in, doesn’t hold much appeal to us today, and if you take a look at the front image on your bulletin, you can see it didn’t have just a whole lot of appeal back in Mary’s day, either.

The angel Gabriel shows up to announce to Mary what’s up and first she’s troubled, then she’s scared, then she pushes back with a bit of logic, then, finally, probably because she realizes she really doesn’t have just a whole lot of say in the matter, she gives up, gives in, surrenders, to what God apparently has in mind in her

life. And out the window flies hopes, dreams, expectations, and any sense of control whatsoever over her life.

She loses a great deal, does Mary, at the point of her surrender. Not only her bearings in the present and any clear sense of the future, but also her status as a bride-to-be and her social standing as a virgin, never mind her handle on how life, in general, is supposed to go. Indeed, due to the stigma associated with what she's just agreed to, Mary also stands to lose her life.

By surrendering to God, Mary of Nazareth stands to lose quite a lot. Just how enthusiastic does she look about that?

But we know, too, don't we, when we look at the whole story, that by going with the divine flow, Mary gains something, too. What? A sense of rightness, of righteousness, of seminal possibility? Maybe even a kind of relief as she lets go into a flow she's hoping can be trusted?

Now, honestly, I'm not of the mind these days that Mary was necessarily somebody all that special, as if she and only she could possibly qualify for her particular brand of divine disruption. Can you imagine that God's intentions for the world were somehow dependent upon this Mary of Nazareth's cooperation?

I have a sign over my desk in my study at home. In fact, I have lot of signs over my desk in my study at home, every one of which is meant to remind me about some fundamental truth that I tend to forget in my clenched up busyness and determination to improve not only myself but this world, this life and this church.

Here's how some of them read. One of them says, "hold things loosely." Another: "let it go; it's not yours. Hope in God." "Sabbath is an act of obedience." "We are called to faithfulness, not success." There's this short prayer: "Lord, help me

weave my way through this day with sanity and grace.” And this hope: “I want to reinvent myself, knowing what I know.” And this wisdom: “One who conquers herself is greater than another who conquers a thousand times a thousand on the battlefield.” Buddha said that, and I couldn’t agree more.

But the sign over my desk that most often slaps me upside the head is the one that reads: “Do you imagine God has no other way than through you?”

‘Do you imagine God has no other way than through you?’

That one packs the biggest wallop, I guess, because the truth is, my deepest, operative answer is often, “Yeah, I often do imagine God has no other way to accomplish God’s way in this world other than through me.”

Oh, the hubris. This is embarrassing to admit. .

But I’m not the only one. Have any of you ever felt that way? As if the world couldn’t possibly turn unless you did a, b, or c? Or for that matter, have any of you ever felt that way about me, as if it only counts if the pastor calls, or prays, or shows up for a meeting? The truth is, none of is all that essential. In fact, another sign over my desk by one John Logue says, “It’s almost impossible to overestimate the **un**importance of most things.” And I would add, most people, even Mary, at least to the Divine intention. In fact, if you’re like me, what happens when we do imagine that we are just that one without whom God simply cannot manage, we tend to run faster and faster in place trying to hold things together – I do this – which leads ultimately to exhaustion and resentment. Is it any wonder our necks and shoulders hurt all the time?

In front of Rockefeller Center in New York City – I’m sure many of you have seen it – is a statue of the Greek god, Atlas, down on one knee, his arms up behind him, straining under the weight on his shoulders, quite literally, of the world.

Well, he and I see the same massage therapist and I happen to know that his trapezii have got nothing on mine.

Yet our polity, our theology and our common sense all agree – there is no single person, neither me nor Mary nor Atlas himself on whom God is dependent to get done what needs doing, least of all paradigmatic, enigmatic, pubescent, Mother Mary.

Truth is, as the insistently unremarkable elements of the nativity narratives keep trying to impress upon us, Mary and Joseph – a middle class couple, following the rules, trying to do right by the government, by each other, by the baby – are really fundamentally, existentially, demographically, and certainly religiously – nobody special. That is, there's nothing exceptional about their essential being except to the extent they surrender themselves to God.

It's not a passive thing, surrendering to God's will. When Mary and Joseph surrender to the will of God, they give into it, give up their resistance, lose themselves to it, what Brian Mahan calls in his book of the same name *Forgetting Ourselves On Purpose*. And what do you know but that suddenly they're at the center of the universe, of creation, of hope, of new life, of creative possibilities beyond their imagining.

I need to make a leap here to say differently what I'm imagining happens in the divine transaction between God and Mary. In fact, I need to switch languages for a minute from the shared patois about our personal, dualistic, and beloved God, to a jargon I'm not really qualified to speak but which attracts me, nonetheless – the language of the Tao.

The Tao, spelled Tao, "is a Chinese word meaning "way', "path', "route..." Within the context of traditional Chinese philosophy and religion, the Tao is a metaphysical

concept originating with a philosopher of ancient China by the name Lao Tze, who is best known as the author of the book, the *Tao Te Ching*.<sup>1</sup>

I'm no scholar of the *Tao Te Ching*; I just want us to borrow a few concepts from it for a moment, particularly that of the Tao as the primordial essence, the fundamental nature, of the universe; not a name for a "thing," but the underlying natural order of Being. In Taoism, the object of spiritual practice is to "become one with the tao," to harmonize one's will with Nature in order to achieve "effortless action." Think of the Tao as a kind of energy or force, as in "the force be with you;" a more impersonal reference to the One we call "God."

Since as a Christian, I can't help but see all religions through the lens of Christianity, I think of the Tao as the Way of the gospel, of Jesus, of wholeness, of rightness, of truth, of fundamental, incarnational alignment with God's intention which can't easily be described but can be felt, recognized, followed.

Now, Taoism employs a more impersonal, non-deistic language that doesn't concern itself with what God wants versus what we want, the way we so often set up religious conversation, so much as with life lining up in such a way that there ceases to be a distinction between divine and human.

And just as with or without our approbation, cooperation, participation or adoration, God is God, so is the Tao, the Tao. It just is, depending on neither our awareness or participation. The flow is just the flow.

Nor does it particularly matter, at least to the Tao, whether we swim upstream or flail around like we're drowning, or even, and this may seem a bit harsh for those of us

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<sup>1</sup> <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tao>

who prefer a gentler God, whether we do, in fact, drown. The flow is just the flow. Our relationship with it, well, that's free will.

Now imagine God as that flow, that energy, that life force into which we may or may not dip, or fall into, or get pushed into. When we "go with it," we're moved along, the shore changes, everything changes, we lose control – how hard this can be – yet something in us, of us, is carried along. And sometimes, on our good days, we may notice or intuit a rightness, a ripeness, an aptness, a life-giving trueness. Is this something Mary gained through her surrender?

Of course the direction of that uncontrollable flow, how fast it's moving, the rapids it introduces along the Way, how the flow affects our personal preferences, all of these we spend our lives sorting out. And if we're lucky, or wise, surround ourselves with communities which help us do the sorting.

But the point I'm wanting to make about Mary is that she is remarkable, not because she was specially chosen or pure or courageous or any other special characteristic, but only to the extent that she surrendered to the divine flow in her life. For it is to that extent that God is able to enflesh God's Self through her.

The same is true of you and me. We are none of us remarkable in our capacity to achieve or manifest righteousness, except to whatever extent we are able to "go with God's flow" in our own lives. For it is only to that extent that, through *us*, God enfleashes God's Self.

Of course, it's more difficult to go with a flow we don't know is there, to consent to or dip in or float along with a flow of which we're not even aware. And that, I think, is what's going our imaginations are limited only to whatever **we** can think of, or initiate or plan or execute, then the only flow we're going with is our own. Which is where I often

get stuck. Hence the signs above my desk in my study which are meant to act as a sort of existential “Goof Off” to my sticky self-absorption.

As a community we also can get stuck in only whatever **we** can think of, initiate, plan or execute. Although I have to say I’ve noticed over recent years a kind of slow, steady loosening of heart and imagination in this communion, a kind of impatience with business as usual combined with a frequently playful exploration of divine possibilities.

Maybe we could think of ourselves as a younger sister of Mary’s, who also gets visited by unwelcome news: a shrinking mainline church, a tanking economy, a deficit budget – who also feels alternately troubled, scared, resistant, and uncertain – but who finally gives up trying to figure it all out and “goes with the flow.”

Maybe we surrender to God we also are giving up control, giving in to uncertainty, “losing” a great deal. But perhaps, like Mary, we also stand to gain a sense of rightness, of righteousness, and of seminal possibility. Maybe even a kind of relief as we release ourselves to the divine flow that can be trusted to carry us and those we love a little closer to the heart of God.

Like Mary, we’re nobody special here at Emory Church, except to whatever extent we go with God’s flow in our shared lives, for it is to that extent that through us God enfleshes God’s Self. And for what else on earth were we created?

To the glory of God. Amen.