

Letting Go of Control

Travel Light (part 4)

Summary: When the weight of the world is on your shoulders, it can feel like you're going nowhere in a hurry. Shake off the burdens of stress, worry, and regret and find the freedom that comes when you Travel Light. You don't always have the power to control, but you always have the power to surrender.

Scripture: Ephesians 4:17–18, 20–24; Luke 1:26–38¹

Date: Sunday, 18 December 2022 (NarellanCong)

Anyone else feel as if every December becomes overwhelming the closer we get to Christmas? It's supposed to be a time for hope, peace, joy, and love, but we treat it like it's the end of the world, and there's places to go, things to do, and people to see before the 25th or ... or what? What is the consequence we expect to happen?

This collective angst reiterates just how important is our current sermon series.² For we all carry 'baggage' into Christmas, yet Jesus' promise is that his yoke is easy and his burden is light (Mt 11:30). When the weight of the world is on our shoulders, it can feel like we're going nowhere in a hurry. We need to shake off the burdens of stress, worry, and regret to find the freedom that comes when we travel light.

In learning to travel light, we are letting go of our stuff—well, at least the hold we allow our stuff to have on us. Kym reminded us to let go of our bitterness—and, oh, how we need to let go of our bitterness. Then Franz reminded us to let go of distractions—so that means no one is going to be on their phone while I am preaching, correct?

To Control or Not to Control?

Today I want us to reflect on letting go of control.

Do you have an area of your life you love to control? Raise your hand.

If you feel like you want to raise the hand of the person sitting next to you, THAT'S the sign you have a problem with control! :-)

Acknowledge The Trouble

The Gospel of Luke tells it's story of Jesus' birth. It is a familiar passage and a comforting story, but there are some elements that would benefit from a little more attention.

But she was deeply troubled by this statement, wondering what kind of greeting this could be. (Luke 1:29)

The story goes like this: A woman named Elizabeth was married to a priest named Zechariah. They thought she was unable to become pregnant, but a messenger from God, an angel named Gabriel, let Zechariah know God would intervene and his wife would give birth to a son. That boy was to be named John. He would announce the fulfillment of God's promises to the people, calling them back to faith and hope.

That miraculous birth was pretty important in itself. What makes the story especially intriguing is that Elizabeth was a cousin to Mary, yet all of what was happening to Elizabeth was unknown to Mary and her family.

After six months, that same angel appeared to the young Mary to make another announcement. According to the Christian Standard Bible's translation, she was "deeply troubled" at the angel's words to her.

Is anyone here surprised at Mary's reaction? Well I'm surprised because the account describes Mary being surprised at the angel's WORDS, but apparently not surprised at the APPEARANCE of an angel. I mean, how times did that happen to her that she should treat his appearance like an every day occurrence?!?

If not at his appearance, of course she was troubled at the angel's words! Who wouldn't be? While such supernatural occurrences were much more common and expected in Mary's time, compared to our day and age, they are still called 'supernatural' for a reason. They are out of the ordinary, that is why they are special when they happen.

Mary was naturally troubled by the appearance of an angel, disturbed by the fact this angel was talking to her, and confused by the content of his message.

Despite our sense of cultural superiority to Mary and the people of her time, her experience in this familiar story is still common. Sitting here, right now, I can imagine there are some of you who are troubled by something going on in your life. You're confused about something someone has said to you and possibly even disturbed by the changing circumstances of our time. Who wasn't bothered by the rise in interest rates this week and the promise of more to come?

When we are troubled, confused, or disturbed, we wish such things were not happening to us. 'Why is this happening? Why me? I can't handle this. I don't know what I'm going to do.'

When we feel that way, we grasp desperately for any control we can find. 'I need to figure this out and I'm going to hold on to, and control, this little bit that I can, to ground this moment on something I can make stable.'

Mary was troubled and disturbed and confused, naturally, and so are we. This state seems to have been a consistent part of the human condition then and still is now.

Do Not Be Afraid

Then the angel told her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. (Luke 1:30)

Here's the thing: while it was right and natural for Mary to be deeply troubled, what happened next was entirely in her control, at least her reaction was.

I don't know if you are anything like me, but I probably would have run away from the angel, screaming like a little girl. But Mary, an actual little girl, found the composure within herself to acknowledge something was troubling her, but she waited to find out more.

"Do not be afraid", the angel said to her, "you have found favour with God!"

When we are troubled, confused, or disturbed, it is only natural we grasp at anything we can control, just to keep ourselves from 'freaking out' or 'falling off the edge'. I get it. We all do it, though some more than others.

But Mary took a deep breath and calmed herself, so that she would not overreact. This slight pause kept her in the moment. As a result, she heard the encouragement of the angel

and quite possibly the most beautiful words anyone could say to another: “You have found favour with God.”

Fight or flight are our ‘built in’ natural instincts to deeply troubling situations. Yet we are a higher order in God’s creation than the animals. We have the capacity to rise above our instincts, to choose better ways to live, and create new habits of behaviour.

Even at the young age of 12-14 years, Mary had developed the presence of mind and openness to new experience that she was capable of calming her fear. The angel reassured she had made the right choice in delaying her reaction and, in so doing, was present to hear those words that affirmed her identity as a child of God.

Our Creator SAW her, for who and what she was, and was pleased with what he saw. Isn’t that beautiful?

How many times have you been so anxious in a moment that you lashed out verbally or even physically? You likely did so to prevent any harm to yourself, to control the situation, without really even knowing what was happening or where the moment was going.

Maybe your son said that dinner tasted funny. You assumed he was being picky, so went on a tirade about how you cook and you clean for him and he doesn’t even do his own chores ... without even checking that the chicken had gone off.

Or maybe your boss called you into his office. You immediately began defending your performance on that last project, then questioned his lack of support ... without even waiting to hear all the commendations that had come in praising your team’s efforts.

Or maybe you were about to step onto the bus when you felt a hand on your shoulder give a little shove. You then lashed back with your elbow and a nasty expletive I won’t even here repeat ... only to discover the senior’s cane had slipped, as she stepped into line behind you, and she had reached out only to steady herself.

When we are troubled, confused or disturbed, by the state of our life or the state of the world, we are quick to lose control in a misguided effort to gain control. Mary’s example shows us that pausing our reactions, that arise out of our fears, creates space in our life for good things to come our way. Good things may not come our way, but at least we won’t make our situation any worse.

Surrender

The fact is Mary had every reason to be troubled, confused, disturbed, and even afraid. Yet, she resisted her natural instinct to react with fight or flight. This opened her up to a situation which, frankly, just got worse!

Now listen: You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you will name him Jesus. (Luke 1:31)

“You will conceive and give birth to son”, the angel told her, “and you will name him Jesus”. This baby will be the fulfillment of God’s promises to his people. He will become great and become a king whose kingdom will outlast us all! Now who doesn’t want such things for their children?

I’m absolutely certain all of that news completely cleared up Mary’s confusion? Not!

“How can this be?” she asked.

The Holy Spirit would make it so. ‘And if you don’t believe me’, the angel said, ‘just check out your cousin Elizabeth! She too is pregnant in a miraculous way. For nothing is impossible with God.’

The sudden appearance of the angel was certainly enough to make Mary deeply troubled and to induce fear, but this explanation was more than enough to induce scepticism and avoidance: ‘This is just not convenient for me. It’s not in my five-year goals. You have no idea. If this happens, I will be pregnant in my wedding gown. I paid a lot of money for that dress, and I wanna look good in my wedding photos!’

That’s how you and I would have responded, but it’s not how Mary responded.

“See, I am the Lord’s servant,” said Mary. “May it happen to me as you have said.” Then the angel left her. (Luke 1:38)

Mary started deeply troubled, confused and disturbed. No one, not really, would have been surprised had she then moved to become sceptical and avoidant. Instead, Mary responded with, “May it happen to me as you have said.”

Let’s be honest: Some of you are wound so tight, you make coffee nervous. You want to control everything; even your kids know it. You want to control what they look like, where they go, who they hang out with, what they do, what they rank on the ATAR, where they are going for uni, who they’re going to marry, how many grandkids they’re going to have, how they’re going to take care of you when you’re old. You want to control them.

Your spouse, you’re wearing ‘em out. How he chews, how he dresses, what he says, what he wants, where he goes, how he loads the dishwasher, how he vacuums. Of course, vacuuming is important, and must be done with parallel lines, never crossing, and you must get all the way up to the edge. If you don’t do that, you do not honour God. ‘We “do everything as unto the Lord”, right? So vacuum correctly’!

You want to be in control. Some of you really want to control what people think about you. Social media is your greatest weapon. You get to show others the life you want them to see, filtered and edited. It took you 37 attempts to get the Christmas photo by the tree. You almost gave away a kid and divorced your wife, you were so mad at each other. #blessed!

It’s funny because the more you try to be in control, the more you fear losing control. The more you fear losing control, the more you want to be in control. It’s a lose/lose situation.

“Do not be afraid”, the angel said to Mary and says so to you and I even now.

This is going to be painful to hear, but I promise, on the other side of this insight, you will find the faithfulness of God: **You do not always have the power to control, but you always have the power to surrender.**

You don’t always have the power to control, to make him do what you want, to make her behave like you want, to get your marriage where you want it to be, to get your finances in line finally, to get your future lined up just right, to get your health where you want it, to have your kids doing everything you want them to do. You don’t always have the power to control, but you do have the power to surrender.

What happened to Mary is not unusual, not really. She was not special. Despite all the accolades, statues, naming rights on buildings and cathedrals, special days devoted to her, Mary was just Mary, a young teenager from Nazareth, ‘out back o’ Bourke’ in Galilee. She had hopes and dreams just like any other little girl.

Mary likely dreamt about getting married. She didn't have any options like our young women do. She couldn't just text the cute guy she met at youth camp or wherever. There was no *eHarmony*. She couldn't go on whatever Christian version of Tinder there is. Mary had a limited community to choose from, if she had any choice at all; otherwise, she was just like any other girl.

Mary likely wanted a guy with just a few simple, basic qualities. Women don't really have a lot they're asking for, just the basics: someone strong and handsome, and charming, who drove a nice donkey—a newer model that's reliable, nothing fancy—a good job, a man with a bright future, someone with strong hands and a soft heart.

Mary likely wanted someone close to his mum, but not a momma's boy. A guy that was bold, yet humble. Someone who was decisive, yet flexible. Well-groomed, but not obsessive. Somebody that was fit, but who did not post topless Instagram pictures—men, if you do this, just stop it, show some modesty; you'll answer to God for that!

Mary would have wanted someone that had big goals, yet was easygoing. Someone that made her feel safe, but was just a little bit dangerous. Someone who liked chocolate-covered strawberries, long walks on the beach, old movies, and whatever else.

Most of all, Mary would have wanted a guy that was godly. This would be the man that would protect, provide for, and help to create a family with her, the daddy to her children, after all.

Is this really too much for which to ask?

Mary had dreams. She'd meet a guy and he would propose to her on the Bethlehem bridge. The photographer would get the perfect moment. They'd get married at Jerusalem Gardens and they would slow dance to ... what's the popular slow dance song these days? In my day, it was "Stairway to Heaven" because that song goes on and on and on.

Their life would be perfect. They'd have two kids, a boy and a girl. The boy would be named Joey, Junior. The girl would be named Olivia or Amelia ... they couldn't decide quite yet. They'd have a dog, not a cat. They'd watch Netflix and chill every night of the week ... well, at least four nights, whatever.

The point is Mary likely had a plan for her life, not that she had too much control over it all, but she had hopes and dreams, just like anyone and everyone does ... and then this angel shows up, unexpectedly and uninvited, revealing God had a very different plan for her life. Troubled, confused, disturbed, and afraid? Of course she was!

Let me guess: some of you had plans, yet life has not gone as expected. You were done at two kids, yet got a bonus round. Or you hoped for three, but couldn't conceive at first, if at all. You're troubled and afraid.

You thought you landed the perfect job ... but then the company downsized after 4 months and you were lowest on the ladder, right? Now your finances are tanking and you're not sure you'll be able to pay rent, make a car payment, put food on the table.

Maybe your marriage is not as romantic as you thought it would be, if you're married at all. Or there's going to be an empty chair at Christmas this year due to an argument or a death.

Maybe your marks aren't going as well as you had hoped. Or your friendship group keeps splintering. Fashions, hobbies and gimmicks keep changing and you can't keep up.

You didn't think life would be like this, so out of control. You're deeply troubled. And you have every reason to be.

You are like Mary.

Understand too that Mary did not know what would become of her story if she surrendered to God's plan. She didn't know that three decades later, her first born son would be on a cross, even though he did not deserve such treatment. He would die, then God would raise him from the dead, all the angels would sing, and he would ascend into heaven. That would be her glimpse into how all the promises of this angel, standing unexpectedly before her, had been fulfilled.

So, yes, the Christmas song is justified when it asks, "Mary Did You Know?" Mary did not know all that would happen and neither do you know what is going to happen in your particular story, what will be the outcome of your situation.

Mary had a choice to make. Neither she, nor I, nor you have the power always to control, but she, I and you have the power to surrender to the One who can control.

That is exactly what Mary did. "May it happen to me..." Come on! She couldn't have possibly known what that would mean, but she surrendered in the moment anyway to God's plans for her life.

Mary had a choice between her dreams and God's destiny, between her plans and God's purpose. Was she going to have the control she desired or was she going to respond to God's call?

Even though she did not, nor could she have, understood the plan, she trusted God's purpose. She chose to let go of control in favour of God's call. She released her dreams, knowing God's destiny for her would be far better. God was doing something and she chose to be a part of THAT rather than accept the uncertainty of her chosen path.

You don't always have the power to control, but you can always surrender.

No Partial Surrender

"May it happen to me..." To say, and mean, something like this demonstrates that, for Mary, this was no partial surrender. She offered herself completely to God's purposes, even though she must have been beginning to realise such a plan, even though it was God's, was going to change everything for her.

There is no such thing as a partial surrender. You're either in or you're not; you either give it up or you don't. There's no half measure or even quarter measure. It's complete surrender or it's something else.

Do you trust God or not? Can he save your soul or can't he? Does he have your best interests at heart or doesn't he? Has God done what is necessary and Jesus done what you couldn't or not? Can you trust God?

You can trust him to heal you of your past mistakes but can you trust him to take care of your money? You can trust him to fill you with peace when you're hurting but can you trust him with your kids?

Either we control these things or we don't. It often feels like we are not in control of our hurts, habits and hang-ups, not in control of our money nor our kids, but will we EVER feel like we are in control of these things? If not, then surrender to the One who can.

All of us have areas of our lives we are trying to control. For each of us, that desire to control is a lack of faith. 'Only I can make this happen. If it's going to be, it's up to me. I have to get in there, I have to be strong, I have to manipulate it or negotiate it. I have to make it happen.'

The more we find ourselves trying to control, the more we over-estimate our ability to control, and under-estimate the power and goodness of God.

Anyone who finds his life will lose it, and anyone who loses his life because of me will find it. (Matthew 10:39)

Jesus taught something diametrically opposed to everything our culture tries to convince us of: If you try to be in control, you will actually lose control. If, instead, you give up your life—and by that he means surrender control to him—you will find your life.

The American revivalist Charles Finney described surrender this way:

When you come back to God for pardon and salvation, come with all you have to lay all at His feet. Come with your body, to offer it as a living sacrifice upon His altar. Come with your soul and all its powers, and yield them in willing consecration to your God and Savior. Come, bring them all along—everything, body, soul, intellect, imagination, acquirements—all, without reserve. (Charles Finney)³

Don't misunderstand what is meant here by surrendering control. Surrender is an attitude of yielding, letting go of the need to control everything, especially those things we can't control even if we want to. It is recognising you do not, nor are you expected to, do everything in your life or anyone else's.

Nor does surrendering control mean we do nothing. Of course, we are still very much involved in our own lives, in the lives of our loved ones, and those close to us. Yet they too are involved in our life and so too is our Creator. Think of your life more as a team effort! Surrender is simply acknowledging you have your part to play and God has his part ... and, oh, how we need him to do his part, to take the lead, to show us the way to go, and what is good because we are oh so bad at figuring that out for ourselves!

Queen Victoria understood this when she remarked:

Oh! How I wish that the Lord would come during my lifetime.... I should so love to lay my crown at His feet. (Queen Victoria)⁴

Even Her Majesty herself understood, **you don't always have the power to control, but you can always surrender.**

Surrender Daily

"May it happen to me..." The surrender of Mary was no partial surrender, nor was it a 'once and done' surrender!

Mary's life was never the same after surrendering to the announcement of the angel. She had to go to Joseph and tell him what had happened. Engagement during that time of history, and in that place, was treated as if the two were married, but they spent a year apart, until the wedding. Telling Joseph would have been painful for Mary because he would have been within his rights to cancel the wedding or to even have her stoned to death! These were the potential consequences of surrendering to the purpose of God.

Thankfully, the angel intervened by appearing to Joseph as well. Whew! We may have had a very different Christmas story to contend with.

Surrender for Mary meant accepting the consequences from her fiancé and community.

Then after Jesus' birth, the angel appeared again to warn the new parents to escape to Egypt, so they could avoid Herod's death squads, for he was bent on killing any who might challenge him for the throne (Mt 2:13–15).

Surrendering to God's purpose meant a flight to Egypt for this young family.

Then when Jesus was twelve years of age, Mary and Joseph lost him during a family pilgrimage to Jerusalem —and that's putting it mildly! (Lk 2:41–52)

Then he went down with them and came to Nazareth and was obedient to them. His mother kept all these things in her heart. (Luke 2:51)

For Mary, surrendering to God's purpose meant imagining something bigger was happening with her son, to believe that God was in control even if she and her husband were not.

Lastly, need I mention the joy of watching her son minister among the last, the least, the lonely, and the lost; watching him preach to great crowds, yet to have opposition directed at him by other religious leaders; watching the gratitude of those he healed and the scorn of those soldiers guiding him gruffly to the cross that would take his life.

Surrendering to God's purpose meant, for Mary, trying desperately to believe her son's innocence, yet torturous death, meant more good for humanity than her broken heart.

For Mary, as for all of us, surrender happens daily, it is not once and done. It is surrendering in the midst of joys and sorrows, certainty and uncertainty, clarity and confusion, peace and trouble.

Conclusion

We make choices every day and these choices give us the Illusion of control; yet that circumstances can so easily and unexpectedly come undone shows we never truly have control.

Like Mary, when life seems out of control, we can become deeply troubled, confused, disturbed, afraid, sceptical, and avoidant.

The only thing we can control is our response. Will we grasp desperately at anything or anyone to control? Or will we pause, breathe, and remain open to the reveal of God's leading, his plan, his purpose, his provision, his promise?

Control, freely surrendered, can become one of the most freeing moments in your life. Let go of what you cannot change —trust God.

“May it happen to me...” You don't always have the power to control, but you always have the power to surrender.

God can do way more with your surrender than you can do with your control.

Let's finish by praying together the famous prayer of Reinhold Niebuhr:

God, grant me the serenity
to accept the things I cannot change,
the courage to change the things I can,
and the wisdom to know the difference.
Living one day at a time,
enjoying one moment at a time;

accepting hardship as a pathway to peace;
taking, as Jesus did,
this sinful world as it is,
not as I would have it;
trusting that You will make all things right
if I surrender to Your will;
so that I may be reasonably happy in this life
and supremely happy with You forever in the next.
Amen.⁵

Endnotes

- 1 Unless otherwise noted, all scripture quotations are taken from *The Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville, TN, USA: Holman Bible Publishers, 2017).
- 2 Based on a sermon series prepared by Craig Groeschel, Tim Doremus & Chris Beall, “Travel Light”, *Open Network*, <https://replug.link/3f4e1f90> (accessed 25-Nov-2022).
- 3 Charles Finney, “Come to God without Reserve”; as quoted in Elliot Ritzema and Elizabeth Vince (eds.), *300 Quotations for Preachers from the Modern Church*, Pastorum Series (Bellingham, WA, USA: Lexham Press, 2013).
- 4 “Queen Victoria on the Second Coming”; as quoted in “The Preacher’s Notebook: The Collected Quotes, Illustrations, and Prayers of John Stott”, Mark Meynell (ed.) (Bellingham, WA, USA: Lexham Press, 2018).
- 5 Reinhold Niebuhr, “The Serenity Prayer” (1934); as quoted in John Bartlett, *Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations* (Boston, MA, USA: Little, Brown and Company, 1980).