

November 23, 2025 - Trinity Episcopal Church - Feast of the Turning

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“Could the world be about to turn?”
Canticle of the Turning

Nearly every summer, for the past 30 years, my brother and I, along with our families, have traveled to Northern Michigan for vacation: two glorious weeks relaxing on the shore of East Grand Traverse Bay. We follow pretty much the same routine each time we go there. Arriving at our rental cottage, we spend a couple of hours unpacking our cars, unloading the groceries, getting everything settled, and then we head out to the beach with a bottle of champagne, to kick off our coming adventures with a bubbly toast.

My brother declares this particular moment “the best day of the year” because, as he explains it, all the work of planning and packing and travel is behind us, the work of our jobs is paused, and there’s nothing but vacation adventure before us.

I’m *almost* in agreement with my brother. Although I’m certainly not opposed to vacation adventures, I’m a special fan of the time *before* his “best day of the year.” In the weeks leading up to our travels, I love talking about what our family will be doing soon. Making lists of what to bring, where to eat, what hikes to take, what beaches to explore. I get a big dopamine hit from anticipation, from thinking about what is to come. Vacation Advent.

We are poised, today, on the precipice of the season of Advent. This Sunday is the last Sunday of what the church calls ordinary time: all the Sundays since Pentecost, way back in June. And now we're turning the liturgical calendar page from the past year, and moving on to the next, which is one reason why we call today the Feast of the Turning.

It's interesting to me that the church year *doesn't* begin with the birth of the Christ child, the incarnation — the coming of God in human form in the person of Jesus. One could certainly make an argument that the church might declare the moment when God brought God's self into the world as “the best day” and begin its new year there. But, no; the new church year begins with anticipation, begins with Advent. A word which comes from Latin, and means, ‘what is to come.’

What is to come is none other than a sea change. A turning upside down; a radical reordering of things. (Which is another reason to call today The Feast of the Turning.) The incarnation heralds the coming of God's kingdom, which the writer, Brian McLaren, says “*means almost the opposite of what an American like [him] might assume, living in the richest, most powerful nation on earth. To a citizen of Western civilization like [McLaren], kingdom language suggests order, stability, government, policy, domination, control, maybe even vengeance on rebels and threats of banishment for the*

uncooperative. But...those words describe Caesar's kingdom: God's kingdom turns all those associations upside down. Order becomes opportunity, stability melts into movement and change, status-quo government gives way to a revolution of community and neighborliness, policy bows to love, domination descends to service and sacrifice, control morphs into influence and inspiration, and vengeance and threats are transformed into forgiveness and blessing." [page 125, Everything Must Change].

This reordering of the world will unfold all throughout Jesus' life. The interactions he'll have—especially with those most on the margins, most without traditional power—those interactions and the stories and parables he'll tell...everything Jesus will do and say will be to demonstrate and embody this cosmic reordering.

But how did Jesus — the entirely human child, Jesus — come to know about all that was to come?

I like to think that he heard her voice in his ear, that he carried her words with him, all throughout his life.

By "him" I mean Jesus; and by "her" I mean Mary, his mother.

I like to think that as Jesus was growing up, he did that thing that all kids learn how to do, to listen in on adult conversations without

letting the adults know that they're listening in, and then spending the moments just before they fall asleep trying to figure out the meaning of what it is they've overheard. Over time, after weaving together the bits and pieces of stories gleaned from stealth listening, I can imagine that Jesus eventually figured out that he wasn't a regular kid who came into the world in the regular way, even if it would take him a lifetime to truly puzzle out what that different beginning meant for his life.

I like to think that Mary, as she spent time with her oldest son, took deliberate care to communicate to Jesus that he had a special role to play in the world, that God had plans for him. I imagine her telling him stories, from scripture, about their ancestors Moses and Abraham, Jacob and David, and all the truth-telling prophets from ages past who changed peoples' lives by their strong words and principled example.

On those days when Jesus went off with Joseph and his brothers and uncles and cousins, to the synagogue, to study and debate the intricacies of Torah and what the great rabbis who came before had said, I like to think that Mary, under the guise of catching up with Jesus about what had happened during that day's studies, inserted her own thoughts atop those of the learned men. I like to think that she would ask Jesus what they had talked about, and then she might point out, using a story from her own life or the life of one of her friends,

that all these things that the scholars talked about hypothetically, they had a real impact on real people.

For every elevated, esoteric debate the rabbis and their students were having about some fine point of the law, Mary brought it down to a practical level. What it felt like to be poor and unseen. About how absurd it was that those who were sick were shunned and excluded because people held to some outdated notion about how being sick was a curse from God for having done wrong, when it was clear to Mary that that was fear talking, that illness rained down on the good and the bad alike.

Recalling her own situation as a pregnant, unwed young girl, and thinking about how badly things could have gone for her if Joseph hadn't trusted God, I imagine Mary quietly advocating for children and widows, for enslaved people and women whose husbands had abandoned them, saying, “can you imagine how awful it is to be in that situation?” and “is that really the way that God wants the world to work?”

I like to think that Mary spent a good deal of her parenting efforts trying to instill in her son the words her heart sang out when she agreed to God's invitation to give birth to a child who had the potential to change the world. She sang her beliefs, her hopes, in the Magnificat:

*God has mercy on those who fear him
in every generation.
God has shown the strength of his arm,
has scattered the proud in their conceit.
God cast down the mighty from their thrones,
and has lifted up the lowly.
God has filled the hungry with good things,
While the rich have been sent away empty.
God has come to the help of his beloved people,
having remembered his promise of mercy,*

I like to think that Mary's words were painting, for Jesus, a picture of the kingdom of God, a vision of a transformed world order that she wanted him to carry with him as he went out into the Palestinian countryside in his public ministry.

Every time Jesus encountered someone his disciples encouraged him to ignore, or met someone he might have been inclined to look past — like the Syro-Phonician woman who begged for her child's life, whom Jesus initially refused — I imagine Mary's voice bringing him back, reminding him that here was one of the poor and lowly that God wanted to raise up. Here was a marginalized person that God wanted to bring front and center. I like to think that Jesus could hear his mother saying, “she or he or they are God's children, too” and so he pushed through whatever reticence he might have felt, and reached

out to the people that Caesar's kingdom said weren't worthy, worthwhile, or valued.

The revolutionary song that Mary sings about God turning over and reordering the world is her response, her "yes" to God's invitation to bring the incarnation of God into the world, and to raise him up right. In the Eastern Orthodox tradition, Mary is referred to as Theotokos – the God bearer. But knowing that a mother's work has only just begun once she's given birth, maybe Mary could also rightly be called the God-Encourager or the God-whisperer, for the ways she found to tell God's stories, God's promises to the son she shared with God, making God's Word real and tangible, portable and memorable enough for Jesus to carry with him into the world.

In the 1970s, a priest and theologian named Ernesto Cardenal lived in community with a group of Nicaraguan peasants, and recorded in four books their thoughts, their interpretations of the gospels. His work is called *The Gospel in Solentiname*. The ideas in these books come from the point of view of poor and oppressed people who have suffered their whole lives at the hands of the dominant culture, that is, those with great wealth and power which they have used for their own benefit.

Reflecting on the women in Luke's gospel, those who were followers and devotees of Jesus, here's what Ernesto Cardenal wrote.

He said, *“Those women were revolutionaries, and that's why they got involved and supported [Jesus]. And among them was his mother, the most revolutionary of them all. It was she who had said during her pregnancy: 'The powerful will be toppled from their thrones and the humble will be exalted, the hungry will be filled with good things and the rich will be left without a thing.'* Those ideas she had received from the prophets of the Bible. And those ideas Jesus sucked in with her milk. She shaped him, she influenced him, she contributed greatly to his being what he was and to his meeting the end that he did.” [from The Gospel in Solentiname, p. 60]

The radical changes inaugurated by the incarnation, life, ministry, crucifixion, death and resurrection of Jesus started with his mother. They started with a word – a powerful and risky word. They started with Mary's 'Yes'.

But 'Yes' is so often an under-used and undervalued word in our world. Some years ago, I ran across a book that I initially bought for its title, called *The Answer to How is Yes*. It's written by a business management consultant and author named Peter Block. As I read it, I found not only the title intriguing, but also the premise, which Block summarizes, saying that, “this culture, and we as members of it, have yielded too easily to what is doable and practical and popular.” [p. 1]

He goes on to argue that in this kind of environment, 'How?' is the most valued question – before we commit to anything, we want to know how something is going to be accomplished, what the costs and trade-offs will be. What's in it for me. He claims that first asking “how” keeps us from seeking out those things that matter, that are really worth doing, because the 'how' is too difficult, too costly, or too risky. 'How?' keeps us safe and protected; 'Yes' makes us vulnerable and exposed. 'How' paralyzes us in inaction; 'Yes' pushes us forward.

If 'How' is the watchword of popular culture, then Mary's 'Yes' is the heart of Christianity.

'Yes' doesn't mean success, and 'Yes' doesn't mean no cost. 'Yes' means flinging ourselves out into the universe and trusting that the God who has put it on our hearts to know what are the things that really matter has also given us the gifts and the will that will be sufficient to do the work that we've been called to do.

But there's no need for us to do this work all on our own. As we'll hear in the stories of the coming Advent, Mary had her cousin, Elizabeth, and she had Joseph. Zechariah, and Jesus. The disciples, and the women who loved and followed her son. And us? We have each other; we have the examples of Jesus and Mary; we have God's image within us, and God's Spirit alongside us. What we do, we do in community. And beyond the community of Trinity, we need to seek

out, find, and recognize the other yes-sayers in our midst, and invite them to work with us to bring about the world God envisions and about which Mary sang. If we want this world to change and turn, it's going to take all of us. *Amen.*