

I'm going to wager that we all have some kind of theology, that we all have some kind of idea about God, some way we think about God. It might be hard for us to share our ideas with someone else, put our thoughts well into words, but we likely still have some sense of what we believe about God and what this means for how we should live and how the world should be, and that's our theology.

We might not consciously engage our theology very often, but it does shape our thinking and our doing, even if we're not aware of it.

We each have a theology, this church has a theology, some kind of theology invariably influences our civic institutions in this country, and theology undoubtedly plays a role in the actions and decisions of our government.

Theology can be life-giving and it can be really dangerous. Theology can have us commit to peace through justice, and theology can motivate horrendous acts of violence and aggression, it can justify killing and war, land theft and genocide. Theology can set us free, and theology can put us in an ideological chokehold.

Ideas about God that are detached from lived experience, that aren't born from the experience of real lives actually being lived, theology that values organized systems of thought or principles or certainty over what's constantly being taught about God through the messy lived experience of the world, abstract ideas about God can be very dangerous indeed, and prone to becoming ideology.

To resist the influence of destructive and life-limiting theology we need spirituality, we need to embrace the role of spirituality in life, take it seriously - and this can be hard for us, in this culture, because this is a culture of concrete ideas and solid understanding and confident action.

And spirituality is none of those things.

It's an art not a science, life with God is a dance, it's ambiguous, a whole-body experience. Spirituality is the *sense* of the reality of God in our lives - spirituality and theology should dance, experience of God and ideas about God should dance, always.

We make room for spirituality, for this sense we all have, whenever we listen deeply, take time in silence, when we pray, when we gather for worship, receive the sacrament, when we engage with Scripture; we make room for spirituality whenever we're attentive to God's presence as listeners and learners.

We are all embodied, we are sensory, we are perceptive, we are entangled and interconnected with the world around us in more ways than we can ever fully understand, and if our theology is going to serve us, be a healing, liberating, restorative way of thinking, then our experience of the fullness of life must be at the heart of all our ideas about God ... because *all* life is of God.

When theology ignores lived experience, or considers it to be secondary, it becomes fixed and definitive, and that makes it easy for it to be weaponized and used to control, it can justify harm, ignore suffering, legitimize violence and killing, explain away even the most gross acts of injustice. Yet, ironically, any theology that ignores lived experience in fact ignores God.

Theology isn't necessary to encounter God, or to have a life-changing experience of God, to be called by God, or to respond to God, but spirituality is. And perhaps this is a key point made being by the Gospel of Luke as it tells the stories of Jesus' early life.

Mary and Joseph were two essentially ordinary people, not powerful Kings, or prophets, not learned Magi, or Temple priests, or rabbis, they were ordinary people who had a life-changing experience of God and responded faithfully.

There is no theology that could have prepared them for Mary's pregnancy by the Holy Spirit, or that could have helped them navigate parenting the Son of God into adulthood. Being the folks responsible for raising the Messiah must have had an astonishing impact on the lives of these two, and any theology, any thoughts about God they may have had before would have been, I'm pretty sure, useless, given what showed up in their lives. In fact, a fixed and rigid theology would likely have gotten in the way, and stopped them being open to everything that was happening.

Rather than getting caught up in trying to make sense of it all, Mary and Joseph were somehow able to roll with the experience – despite their lack of “understanding;” their trust in the experience of it all somehow kept them going, they were able to discern how to do what they'd been called to do without getting all caught up in why.

Spirituality loosens our grip on the need to understand, the need to understand before we respond to God's call on our lives, spirituality lessens the pressure on us to be certain, or right, and it helps us live as we're called by God and not as we're told to by the demanding narrative of the world around us.

It must have been unbelievably disorienting and isolating (and dangerous) to be Jesus' parents, and I think one of things we're being taught in this week's Gospel lesson is that our spirituality, our *experience of God* and our willingness to respond,

can have a monumental and lasting impact on the world, even if, or perhaps *because* we don't "understand" any of it.

I think Mary's entire story (and Joseph's, he's in there for a bit, too), I think it teaches us that what's crucial in a demanding and broken world is our receptivity to the *experience* of God.

We don't need to understand what's happening for God's mighty power to impact the world through our lives, we just have to be willing to allow it, willing to make space for it and to trust it.

If being called by God to parent the Christ-child wasn't hard enough, the 12 year-old Jesus went and made it just a little bit harder by staying behind in Jerusalem when he should have been heading home with the others. Mary and Joseph finally find Jesus in the Temple, "Why were you searching for me?" Jesus says, "did you not know that I must be in my Father's house?" We're told they don't understand what he said to them, but this doesn't matter, Jesus returns home with them anyway, is obedient to them, nonetheless, and with *them* as parents he increased in wisdom and in years, and in divine and human favor - so they must have gotten something right even though they couldn't make sense of it.

If we're truly open and receptive to God, attentive to life, it's highly likely there's a lot that won't make sense; but given the example of Mary and Joseph, responding to God's call, and participating in stuff that will change the world, it's not dependent on our ability to understand how or why, so let's not wait for that. Theology alone is insufficient for our life with God, spirituality is essential.

We may never understand why the world is the way it is, we may never understand the truth and reality of God in the world, or how things can get ever possibly get better, but I'm not sure our call is to understand, instead, I think, our call is to respond, faithfully, to what we perceive, what we encounter through our experience of this life.

Perhaps, through the telling of Mary and Joseph's story, God is teaching us to trust our experience, to stay attentive and receptive to the life-giving presence of God in our own lives and through the lives of others and in the world around us, and, whether we understand it or not, perhaps God is teaching us to trust, for sure, that our lives, if we let them, will be nothing short of a world-changing response to God's world-healing call.