

What Mary Knew

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Text: Luke 1:39-55

I got myself in trouble the last time I talked about this text in worship. Let me explain...

See, there's this certain song you sometimes hear on the radio this time of year. It's called "Mary, Did You Know?", written by Mark Lowry and Buddy Green, and the song asks that question over and over, 17 times by one critic's count.¹ In this song, Mary is silent as the singer questions whether she knows that her son Jesus will perform miracles, whether she knows that Jesus will save and rule the world, whether she knows that Jesus is God's Son, and that when she kisses her baby, it is God's face that she's touching.

So I said some harsh things about this song, as a way of introducing the gospel lesson, which is all about the things that Mary *did* know. And then a couple of you guys, who I'm not going to put on the spot, but who are just awesome, talented musicians and really kind and wonderful people, and strong in your faith—you guys came up to me and said, "We agree with everything you're saying, but here's the thing—we've been rehearsing this song to sing it tomorrow on Christmas Eve."

I've learned my lesson. I'm not going to trash the song this year. I've made my peace with it, because I don't think it's about Mary at all. I think it's about the songwriters' own sense of awe about the Son of God coming to live with us in the form of a little baby. It's unfortunate that they bring Mary into it in the way that they do—I imagine she's standing patiently there as they ask your questions, nodding, "Yes, yes I did know. I did know that this child was special, that God was up to something astounding and wonderful, and that I was so utterly blessed to be a part of it." Mary did know. But there is room for our astonishment, our confusion, and our questions to be taken up into her praise of God, and her celebration of what God was doing in her and through her. We should listen to her words, though, because Mary is the first Christian, the first human being to believe in Jesus, and what she says and does gives us a model for giving birth to God in our own lives.

First, let's back up and remember how her story begins—the story that we saw played out in our anthem this morning. The angel Gabriel came to Mary and made an extraordinary announcement, that she would give birth to the Son of God. This angel lingered and answered Mary's questions—one question, at least—without holding it against her, without judging her, waiting for Mary to search her own feelings, until she could say, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." God didn't demand Mary's participation. God didn't forcefully commandeer Mary's body, but instead God extended an invitation, awaiting Mary's free and unreserved "yes." If God chose to be so gentle, so patient about something this

¹ Scheer, Holly (21 December 2016). "Why 'Mary Did You Know' Is The Most Biblically Illiterate Christmas Tune". *The Federalist*. <http://thefederalist.com/2016/12/21/mary-know-biblically-illiterate-christmas-tune/>. Retrieved 18 December 2018.

important, how could we ever imagine God could toss aside *your* doubts and questions? Don't ever suppose there isn't room in your prayers for joining with Mary in asking, "How can this be?" Love is patient, love is kind, we read elsewhere in scripture. Love does not insist on its own way. God comes to us in love, seeking our trust and our love, not blind, unquestioning obedience. Wherever you are in your relationship with God today, Mary's story is preserved to reassure you that your uncertainty will call forth God's grace and tenderness. Take it to the Lord in prayer. It can only strengthen your relationship.

And understand that this is true of your relationships with other people as well. If there is no room for you to hold back and question, if there is no room guard your own integrity and sense of who you are and what is important to you, then this is a failure of love. Love allows for questions. Love waits for a free and unforced yes. Love does not insist on its own way.

Today we follow Mary as she pays a visit to her relative Elizabeth. Gabriel had told Mary that the elderly Elizabeth was nonetheless expecting a child, as an example of God's wonder-working power: "Nothing will be impossible with God." At their encounter, the Holy Spirit fills both women, as well as little John the Baptist, still inside his mother, and each of them in their own way testify to the wonder and the power of what is happening—John by leaping and kicking, Elizabeth by pronouncing God's blessing on Mary—not only because of what God is doing, but because of Mary's own faith—Mary is blessed, Elizabeth says, because she "believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." What is praiseworthy in Mary, what heaps blessing upon blessing for her, is not simply that God is acting through her, but that she accepts and trusts and celebrates God's activity.

And boy does she celebrate it! The words that Mary speaks are known as the Magnificat, from the first word of the Latin translation of them. They follow the pattern of the psalms of the Hebrew Bible, beginning with ringing words of praise, and then explaining what God has done to deserve it. Mary begins with her own experience, a simple, poor Galilean peasant whom God took notice of and invited to bring God's Son into the world. In spite of being poor and unimportant in the eyes of the world, Mary knows that she will be honored among future generations, because of her part in God's story. She has been lifted up from her humble position to participate in God transforming and saving the world, and this drives her to wonder and praise and gratitude. But she doesn't stop there. She recognizes that what God has done for her is a reflection of who God is, a pattern repeated over and over again in God's dealings with people. God scatters the proud and topples powerful rulers. God lifts up the poor and lowly. God reverses the systems of privilege in the world, giving food to the hungry, and depriving the rich of the excess they had regarded as their birthright. And God confirms who God is through these actions over generations, making and keeping promises. Mary was astonished. Mary was awe-struck at the role God had offered her. But don't try to tell me Mary didn't know what was up. Mary knew!

And her testimony is meant for us. Mary doesn't need to be instructed by us. We need to learn from her. Now, Mary gave birth to Jesus, and none of us is going to do that. But here's the new, amazing thing God was doing in her... God was taking on a human shape in our world. God, in Jesus, was coming to live with us and be one with us in our joy and our sadness. God, in Jesus, was taking on flesh that could touch us, feeding us, healing us, bringing comfort and acceptance and love that we could feel in our own bodies. God, in Jesus, was entering into the worst things we experience—hunger, doubt, loneliness, rejection, injustice, and even death. And Jesus, who came to love, feed, heal, and generously give his life for others, when he rose from the dead and

ascended to heaven, left us to be his flesh, his body. Mary was the first God-bearer, but everyone who believes is a God-bearer now.

Mary knew, but do we? Do you understand that your hands are God's hands, your voice God's voice? Mary sings about justice for the poor and the overthrowing of nations, not through violence, but through the birth of her child. Do you know what power God wields in you when you do a kindness— when you share your food with the hungry, like those of you who have been busy filling up the Center for Food Action collection basket this month? Do you know the power God wields in you when you help a parent who's in prison give their child a Christmas gift? Do you hear Mary when she sings about what God can do with someone overlooked and insignificant like her? Did you know, did *you* know that God's Son is longing, waiting, hoping to be born in you, even today?

There was some good news this week amid all the rising anxiety about the omicron variant, and the aftermath of the tornadoes in the South and Midwest. Two months after being taken hostage in Haiti, a group of Amish and Mennonite mission workers and their families were freed. The group had been helping to rebuild earthquake-damaged homes and organizing infrastructure projects in a poor country devastated again and again by natural disasters. But what really struck me was the statement that the group addressed to their kidnappers:

We do not know all of the challenges you face. We do believe that violence and oppression of others can never be justified. You caused our hostages and their families a lot of suffering. However, Jesus taught us by word and by His own example that the power of forgiving love is stronger than the hate of violent force. Therefore, we extend forgiveness to you.²

I've seen this powerful testimony offered by other people from this faith tradition in other circumstances as well. They profess this amazing belief in the power of God's forgiveness to transform lives, to prevent harm, and, in the end, to remake the whole world. They believe God can work these miracles through them—not when life is easy, but when they have been mistreated and frightened.

Can you imagine what could happen, if all of us who follow Jesus lived and acted with the knowledge that God's presence on earth really can be born in us? That welcoming the stranger, loving and forgiving enemies, and generously sharing ourselves and our worldly goods with those in need carries the world-transforming power of God? That though we may think ourselves ordinary and insignificant, God's love moving through us and in us has the power to topple kingdoms, lift up the lowly and forgotten, and satisfy the world's hungers? Do *you* know, do *you* trust that God can work these wonders through an ordinary person like you, acting with extraordinary love? If we understood this, if we really took it in, then maybe we wouldn't feel the need to lecture Mary. Maybe instead we could join our voice with hers and sing, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior!" Amen.

² Christian Aid Ministries, "Update on Haiti kidnapping." 17 Dec 2021. <https://christianaidministries.org/updates/haiti-staff-abduction/>.