

Yes, Mary Knew!

David A. Baer

*Fourth Sunday in Advent (C)
December 23, 2018*

Text: Luke 1:39-55

This time of year I sometimes find myself arguing with the radio. There's this song I keep hearing, and it bugs me. It was written in 1991, and it's been described as a contemporary Christmas classic, recorded by at least a half-dozen different singers. And the melody, I'll grant you, is haunting and beautiful and rich. But it's the words that drive me bonkers. The song is "Mary, Did You Know?" by Mark Lowry and Buddy Green, and it asks that question over and over, 17 times by one critic's count.¹ In this song, Mary is silent as an unnamed interrogator 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. In this song, Mary is ignorant of the great story unfolding within her own body, which has to be explained to her by male songwriters living some two thousand years later. In this song, Mary is God's passive instrument, with no agency or understanding, no ability to choose or consent to God's invitation. It makes me want to yell back at the radio.

Because for anyone who takes care to listen to her words in scripture, the answer to that question is plain. You're darn right she knew! Mary knew that the child growing inside her was extraordinary. She knew that Jesus was going to bring God's salvation in a way that would upend the world. And she not only understood, but she enthusiastically said yes to God's invitation to be the God-bearer, to carry and give birth to God's Son. In today's lesson, filled with the Holy Spirit, she boldly prophesies about what God is doing, and testifies to her joy, wonder, and gratitude. We should listen to her, and not just to put presumptuous songwriters in their place. We should listen to her, 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 bearing God in our own lives.

Last week we heard the story of the angel Gabriel coming and making an extraordinary announcement, that Mary would give birth to the Son of God. We heard how the 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." This was not a demand, not a forceful commandeering of Mary's body, but an invitation awaiting a free and unreserved "yes" from Mary. So don't ever imagine God not having time for your doubts and questions. Don't ever imagine 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,

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.

Mary's story is preserved to reassure you that your uncertainty will meet with God's grace and tenderness. Take it to the Lord in prayer. It can only strengthen your relationship.

And understand that in your relationships with other people in this world, 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 are people who really believe this and live it out. I was talking with folks at Bible study this week about a story that still amazes me. In a community in upstate New York, near where my family vacations, a drunk driver struck and killed a group of Amish traveling in a buggy. And without hesitation, without delay, the community sent representatives to visit the driver in jail and forgive him. Here's why—one Amish business owner explained it this way: "Maybe if somebody had forgiven the imprisoned driver for his first transgressions years ago the ... accident never would have happened."² That's astounding. This man really believes that forgiveness had, and *still* has, the power to alter the life story of someone who killed people he loved. That's an amazing faith in the power of God's forgiveness to transform lives, to prevent harm, and, in the end, to remake the whole world. And this man believes God can work these miracles through him—not when his life is easy, but when he's hurt and grieving.

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 Gwen Chamberlain and Al Bruce, "A year of tolerance has passed." *GateHouse News Service*. 23 Jul 2012.