

“YEAH, I THINK SHE KNEW”

LUKE 1:39-56

17 DECEMBER 2017

FOR WESTMINSTER PRESBYTERIAN, GREENVILLE, SC

Our New Testament text picks up in a familiar spot: the angel Gabriel has announced to Mary that she is carrying the Son of the Most High. She is baffled and hears as comfort those oft-overlooked words, “For nothing is impossible with God.” *We begin today immediately following: Luke 1, verses 39-56.*

39 In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country,
40 where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. 41 When Elizabeth heard Mary’s greeting, the child leapt in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit 42 and exclaimed with a loud cry, ‘Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. 43 And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? 44 For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leapt for joy. 45 And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.’

46 And Mary said,

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,

47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.

Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me,
and holy is his name.

50 His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.

51 He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.

52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.

54 He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,

55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

56 And Mary remained with her for about three months and then returned to her home.

Let us pray: *may the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our Rock & Redeemer. Amen.*

Every Christmas Eve the Stuckey family—my mother, father, the cat, and I—gathered in our sunroom before church. Dressed in his Sunday best, my dad would stroll to the record player, drop the needle on Nat King Cole’s *The Magic of Christmas* and, for an hour or so, we’d listen to the crooning beautiful melodies of Nat with his band.

That’s how I remember it, at least. I’m sure my mother has some color to add: more screaming, a hidden bow, a mad dash to the car to get to church only reasonably late, and more likely than not a worn-out cassette.

But the Rockwellian image is burned into my mind, backed always by Nat King Cole. That one detail I’m sure of. His voice still melts me today, sends me back to our sunroom in 1992, and I truly believe that all other Christmas records are, in comparison, terrible. Frankly, I think we should’ve just stopped writing new Christmas songs—with exceptions, of course, for Mariah Carey and Sharon Jones—in 1961. And the reason I believe that is a little ditty, penned in the tumultuous early ’90s (and hang with me here), called *Mary, Did You Know?*

Mary, did you know, the singer asks, that your baby boy will one day walk on water?

Mary did you know that your baby boy will save our sons and daughters?

Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod?

And when you kiss your little baby, you have kissed the face of God?

It’s fine, really. It serves a purpose: pulling at our heartstrings and harkening us to Jesus’ adulthood. To its credit, it’s also a Christmas song about Jesus. Here’s my problem with the song: it seems pretty clear, pretty certain really, that yes, Mary knew. Not only that: Mary wrote a better song.

In Nazareth Mary heard news from Gabriel. “You will conceive...the Son of the Most High...he will reign...and of his kingdom there will be no end.” Mary was so overcome, so perplexed, so joyful that she packed up and set off for her cousin Elizabeth’s home, some 70 miles in the countryside. It’s a strange scene, and frankly it shouldn’t have happened. A young maiden engaged to be married would be expected to stay put until her wedding, living in seclusion until her she took her groom. We have no indication that she even told Joseph where she was going. Met with the life-altering news, she got up and went.

Even here, by showing us Mary's journey to her cousin, Luke is preparing us. The arrival of the Messiah means strange things, unexpected things, a poor young woman carrying eternity, sets off for the faraway countryside. That same woman, favored for her lowliness, is greeted by her elder, a woman who herself is carrying a prophet in her womb.

Set the scene in your mind. Here is Elizabeth, whose son, the Baptist, will prepare the way. Here is Mary, whose son, the Christ, will bring salvation. Before Mary gets to her door, Elizabeth recognizes in her the glow of eternity and utters a world-changing proclamation that confirms Gabriel’s visitation—calling Mary “the Mother of my Lord,” Elizabeth is the first person in the gospel of Luke to confess faith in Jesus. Like I said, strange things start happening when the Messiah is on the horizon.

Mary did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?

Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day rule the nations?

It’s an incredible moment, and not only because Luke foregrounds the speech of two women in a culture where women were expected to be silent, it’s incredible because these two women are living theology. In their lives and their songs they teach us who God is, and show us exactly what God will do. Elizabeth called Mary “Mother of My Lord.” And Mary was so full,

so overcome, so joyful, that the only thing she could do to make meaning of the incredible was to sing about it.

Gabriel told her. Elizabeth told her again. And then she told us. Mary knew.

I don't mean to harp on it, but what really gets me about *Mary, Did You Know* is that it's catchy. It's one of songs that gets stuck in your head—earworms, they're called—there's really no way of banishing it from your inner musical monologue. I find myself singing *Mary, Did You Know?* almost reflexively during the Christmas season. And then I find myself wondering what exactly Mary knew and when, like some biblical Law and Order.

Songs have a way of becoming ours. That's why we sing hymns each Sunday: they teach us, through poetry and repetition, who God is, they are often our first exposure to theology. We believe that there are three kings because the hymn told us so; we are sure that God is a mighty fortress because Luther put it to song.

That's the power of music: who doesn't swoon, remembering their first love, when Sam Cooke croons "What a wonderful world," who doesn't rage at *Jolene* with her auburn hair, or weep at as Whitney mourns lost love? Who's not transported to a little sunroom and a charmed childhood upon hearing the first notes of *Chestnuts Roasting on an Open Fire*? Songs do something to us, they help us understand and organize our lives. Their repetitions stick in our minds and make meaning of discord.

Listening to *Mary, Did You Know*, wondering just how much of a handle she had on her role in salvation-history is an easy task, a nice melodic musing. It's much more difficult to actually listen to *Mary*. Because Mary's song, beautiful though it is, is rather inconvenient. And it can make merry discord of our nicely ordered lives.

Consider the irony: today in our beautiful sanctuary with our bespoke Christmas clothes on our well oiled walnut pews we hear God praised for scattering the proud, bringing down the powerful, and sending the rich away without their dinner.

We can't hear that, we can't truly listen to Mary, without being implicated. We live and prosper in a world that rewards power, an economy that exploits laborers, and a society that refuses to recognize those most in need. I don't mean to sound harsh, that's the text we're given, the Scriptures we call "Holy." The Magnificat is a rebuke of the status quo, both then and now. It is a challenge to ambivalent discipleship. It is a hard pill to swallow. But it's also an opportunity.

In the Magnificat Mary directs praise from herself to God. Not to get too in the weeds, but she sings in an aorist tense, a grammatical form that calls the past into the present. Mary understands that the same God who called Israel into being now calls her to Bethlehem. The same God who proclaimed comfort to the exiles in Babylon, good news for the broken-hearted, and release for prisoners works now in lowly Nazareth.

Hers is a hymn of praise to the God who remembers, who, from creation to the present, shows mercy to lowly forgotten people. Mary recognizes God's work in the world because she experienced it in her own life. She knows that the God who remained faithful to poor Israel, who recognized amongst the grandeur of kings the humility of a lowly maiden, rests now in her womb. That's why Mary sings: what God did for Israel, God does for Mary. What God did for Mary, God does for us.

Recognition. Redemption. Reconciliation.

There's a catch though. Verses 50-56 with all their talk of power and money lay it bare. As long as we're sitting pretty on our self-made thrones, as long as we concern ourselves only with how we look, what the markets are doing, or when we can acquire the next-best-thing, we will not be able to joyfully celebrate the coming of the Messiah. As long as we continue to believe that we're self-made and self-sufficient, that the cars we drive and the lives we live are a divine tic-for-tac, we will be blinded to God's work in our world and our lives, we will be unable to experience the advent of Christ's Kingdom and the reversals it brings as unmitigated joy.

It is only when we celebrate the leveling plain of God's mercy, offering concern for our neighbor, challenging economies of scarcity, and making roads for those struggling down the crooked path of life, that we will truly rejoice in God's work.

Mary sings her song but it is not a soothing lullaby (at least not always for us). If we are to experience God's expansive mercy and bountiful blessing then we've got to allow ourselves to be cut to size. We've got to make the Magnificat ours, which requires a de-centering from our wants and needs, from what we can accumulate and accrue, toward the humble God lying exposed in a stable.

Mary didn't have a crystal ball. She couldn't have known exactly what would happen every moment of Jesus' life. But she knew what God's coming into the world *meant*. She knew what a rightly ordered Kingdom was. She knew that things were about to turn.

Mary knew.

The rich, the self-satisfied, the rulers who have taken what is rightfully God's, have enough. God passed them by, instead choosing to fill the hungry, the poor, a lowly maiden. God is at work in the world, transforming a culture of scarcity and exclusion into a table of bounty where all are invited and all are fed. And God is working in us too, turning us and reorienting us in order that we too, when greeted and challenged by the living Lord, might sing *with* Mary, experiencing as our own the joy of a world about to turn.

Mary knew, and now we do to. The question this Advent is what we'll do about it.

Now when you're recapping this sermon for all of your friends and family, when you're making the 11:15 crowd jealous that they chose to listen to adorable children proclaim the good news rather than listening to Mary's cutting Magnificat, don't focus too much on *Mary, Did You Know?* Let's say, for the purpose of retelling, that I'm agnostic about the Christmas classic.

Focus instead on what Mary's joy might mean for us. We don't talk about it a lot because it sounds a bit crazy, but we're waiting for Christ too. We, like Mary, have the opportunity to play a part in bearing Christ into the world. We can continue the work begun at creation and perfected in the incarnation: the work of welcome, the work of risk, the work of equality, the work of joy.

At Christmas we proclaim the impossible: the infinite made finite, God become human, the Messiah born to his people. Nothing is impossible for the God who has done that. If a child can be born a Savior, then the world can be transformed, the hungry filled, the poor housed, the rich can finally recognize that enough is enough.

That is who our God is, that is what our God does. Elizabeth knew. Mary knew. We know. This Advent we have to ask ourselves if we will be participants in the great reversal or if we will attempt to thwart the Messiah. But here's the other thing, and Mary knew it too, whether we welcome it or not, whether we choose to see it or ignore it, the Messiah is coming. God is faithful (even when we dig in our heels) and the world is about to turn. Repeat it, sing it until it becomes your own.

- ⁵⁰ His mercy is for those who fear him
from generation to generation.
- ⁵¹ He has shown strength with his arm;
he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts.
- ⁵² He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,
and lifted up the lowly;
- ⁵³ he has filled the hungry with good things,
and sent the rich away empty.
- ⁵⁴ He has helped his servant Israel,
in remembrance of his mercy,
- ⁵⁵ according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.'

Amen.

—The Reverend Leigh Stuckey