

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11
I Thessalonians 5: 16-24
Luke 1: 39-55

Mary, Did You Know?
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Did you ever listen to a song, that you couldn't get out of your head, and, on one level, really enjoyed...but on another level, you really disagreed with the lyrics? Or at least argued with them? Sometimes these are hymns, and then what do we do when they turn up in the bulletin? My daughter Elizabeth and I would sometimes listen to old popular songs on Pandora, like "Let's Live for Today" by The Grass Roots. With the lyrics:

"We'll take it nice and easy

And use my simple plan

You'll be my lovin' woman

I'll be your lovin' man.

Sha la la la la live for today and don't worry about tomorrow"

And Elizabeth and I would say, "Oh, you mean you don't want to deal with consequences? How is that supposed to be OK for me?"

My most recent catchy song with questionable lyrics is the Christmas song "Mary, Did You Know," especially as covered 3 years ago by the acapela group Pentatonix. They really sing it quite beautifully. But the biblical Mary I know, brave and rather complicated, is replaced with a sentimental cartoon of the doting mother, enraptured by her "baby boy," who will do amazing things. And then, Mary is portrayed as the ultimate example of a fallen humanity that needs to accept Jesus as its personal Savior: "the child you've delivered will soon deliver you." That said, how would we answer that question, "Did Mary know what was actually going to happen?"

And I have heard pastors and theologians take up both sides on this question. I've heard that one wrote a skit called "Magnifican't" which says that Mary did indeed know, and so she gave a lot of reasons that she was not up to the job. But then I ask myself: who actually *does* know what's coming before they give birth?

I think that no one has been depicted in art as many times as Mary, the mother of Jesus. Whether it's the Annunciation – the scene with the angel Gabriel; or the Visitation with her cousin Elizabeth with the Magnificat; or the Nativity scene; or the Madonna with child; or the mother at the foot of the cross, or Mary holding her crucified son Jesus in her arms – the Pieta- we can think of countless paintings and sculptures, countless images of this one person. Usually, it is an idealized image: the perfect young woman, placed on a kind of pedestal high above messy humanity, but at the same time, submissive and weak. Serene in her blue robe, she floats above us, too good for everyday use.

In the early years of the Christian church, the arguments about the divinity and humanity of Jesus spilled over into arguments about this young woman. Surely the holiness and purity of Christ demanded that the one who carried him was also in some way unique and pure. In the 5th century, the council at Ephesus declared that Mary of Nazareth was *Theotokos*, the Mother of God. Down through the ages other teachings has been developed, accepted or rejected: that she was born without sin, and continued sinless through her life, that she was a virgin her entire life, that she ascended bodily into

heaven at the end of her life. She became a human link to the Divine Jesus, an object of adoration and wonder.

But what about the Mary who was not an object of anything? What about the teenage girl – we *think* she was a teenager – all that we know is that she was unmarried- in Nazareth? What if we pulled Mary back down to earth, where we live, where we struggle, where we doubt, and where we hope. What was that girl like, and what was she going through?

Of course, we don't know much. We have glimpses of Mary in Scripture; otherwise the history pages are blank. We can study the culture and society of her time, and try to eke out a better understanding, but we will always be speculating. What we have in the first chapter of the Gospel of Luke is a series of un-verifiable conversations: with an angel, with a cousin, and with God. It is in those conversations, those few words that we seek the human Mary and the human response to Good News and new life.

The first conversation, with the Angel Gabriel, is something we will read next week, on Christmas Eve. Suffice it to say today that in the course of the Annunciation, Mary goes from puzzlement to thoughtfulness to questioning to acceptance. “Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” she says. She is echoing the words of prophets before her. Prophets like Isaiah, who, in his vision of God, heard the question, “Whom shall I send?” and answered, “Here am I, send me.” Mary joins the ranks of those who are **not** really eager to take on prophetic tasks. She was not eager to become an unwed mother. But she was, in some way, overcome, or overshadowed by the Holy Spirit, giving her a sense of God's power. Did she choose? Could she have said, “No?” All we can say is that she accepted her fate, as she understood it, and accepted her future, as she understood it.

On one level, Mary's life was ordinary: she was not rich or famous or powerful. She is extraordinary because she accepts God's call as a blessing. She is able to interpret her life in the light of God's power. But these are very strange blessings. Normally we thank God for the blessings of the good life: comfort, wealth, and good health. In the glow of candlelight and manger scenes we may forget that Mary, God's favored one, was blessed with having a child out of wedlock who would later be executed as a criminal. We need to re-learn the contradictions and reversals built into God's promises. Mary's song of the Magnificat is a song of hope, but it takes a very long view. Mary has shifted from her immediate concerns to the global picture: the 30,000 foot view, as it is sometimes called. Someone amazing is about to be born, something incredible is about to happen. Like the ripples moving outward from a pebble dropped in a still pond, the effects of that birth will be felt by all generations.

We are fascinated with Mary: we react to her story with curiosity, with adoration, with sympathy. But I think that more is possible when we pull her down to earth, and identify with her. We can identify with her puzzlement, with her inner dialogue about the meaning of God's word. It gives us permission to take time to adjust to astonishing news, to question whether or not trials and tragedies, or God's magnificent promises, are for real, and to contemplate potential outcomes. We can ask with her, “How can this be?” when confronted with good or bad news in the doctor's office, or in the national news, in our families. The message of the angel contains a kernel of comfort hidden within the mysterious unfolding purposes of God. No wonder Mary struggled at the Annunciation; no wonder we struggle when confronted with these “announcements” of new life.

Becoming a mother, in whatever sense of the word, involves strength, hope, courage. Rabbi Abraham Heschel, wrote that in each and every person there is a potential mother: “No person is

sterile. Every soul is pregnant with the seed of insight. It is vague and hidden. In some people, the seed grows, in others it decays. Some give birth to life. Others miscarry it. Some know how to bear, to nurse, to rear an insight that comes into being. Others do not..."

People get preoccupied with Jesus' conception, but perhaps the real miracle here is not in how Mary became pregnant. It is how she carried the insight within her into birth. The miracle is the song of possibility that this insignificant girl, but revolutionary, sang: a song that opened the doors of heaven to the world. And I believe that this song is something that we can share. By bringing Mary down to earth, we can ride her coattails back to heaven.

The down-to earth Mary would be regarded by the people in charge, the Romans, as just another disposable peasant woman. Roman soldiers had mercilessly raped her kinswomen when they crushed the Galilean revolt of 4 B.C.E., around the same time Jesus was born. The circumstances around that birth were clearly scandalous, which gave those who opposed the early Christian community the ammunition to discredit and disparage Mary. She could not be seen as a shining icon of "traditional family values." In fleeing the political terror of her homeland to give birth, she and Joseph became refugees, migrant day laborers in Egypt navigating a strange world of unfamiliar language and custom. Mary, did you know that was coming when you sang the Magnificat?

I would answer yes and no. Her song has nothing to say about fancy miracles like walking on water, or even forgiving sin. It has nothing to say about a wonder-worker on that scale. Mary sings about a Messiah who will reverse the expectations of an entire people, scattering the proud in clueless assumptions of privilege, lifting up those hearts were burdened, bringing some sense of equity to the hungry and the full. Her song, her vision is more sweeping, social and necessary than any sweet carol can encompass. These are not the words of the "Maiden mother, meek and mild" we love to sing about at Christmas. This is the voice of a prophetic mother, fierce and wild, struggling to survive in a world bent on the brutal oppression of her people. That much, Mary knew about.

So I encourage you to look around in this season with Mary's eyes. Everything was new, there was no script for this, there were no guarantees of happiness...but we cannot ignore the deep joy that we hear in Mary's voice. The world will change. Will you be part of its change for the good? Can you take this leap of faith into the world of the Magnificat? Or will you sing the Magnificat?

Mary is one of us. She is like us: called by God, overshadowed by the mystery of the Holy Spirit, questioning, hoping believing, and finally able to sing. In this season of Advent, we can hope to make ourselves more like Mary of Nazareth, girl of her time, Mother of God.

May God bring us to a sense of the fullness of time, and our place in time, our mission in this world.

Madeleine L'Engle wrote a poem for this season:

This is no time for a child to be born,
With the earth betrayed by war & hate
And a comet slashing the sky to warn
That time runs out & the sun burns late.

That was no time for a child to be born,
In a land in the crushing grip of Rome;

Honor & truth were trampled by scorn-
Yet here did the Savior make his home.

When is the time for love to be born?
The inn is full on the planet earth,
And by a comet the sky is torn-
Yet Love still takes the risk of birth.

