

Preaching for Lutheran Church of the Good Shepherd Pastor Scott Trevithick

Date: December 20, 2020 Year B, 4th Sunday in Advent

Text: Luke 1:26-38 (Designated Lectionary text; Luke 1:46b-55 could be supplemented)

Title: What *Did* Mary Know?

Focus: This sermon will reflect on the lyrics from the song *Mary, Did you Know?* and the two texts from Luke to highlight Mary's receptivity of her role as the mother of Jesus and what she knew about him.

Lyrics from *Mary, Did you Know?*

Mary did you know 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 come to make you new?
This child that you've delivered, will soon deliver you

Mary did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy will calm a storm with his hand?
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

Mary did you know, Mary did you know, Mary did you know

The blind will see, the deaf will hear and the dead will live again
The lame will leap, the dumb will speak, the praises of the lamb

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?
Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
This sleeping child you're holding is the great I am

Mary did you know, Mary did you know, Mary did you know

Songwriters: Lamont Savory / Buddy Greene / Mark Lowry / Courick Clarke / William Barclay / Wayne Buchanan
Mary, Did You Know? lyrics © Capitol Christian Music Group

Gospel: Luke 1:26-38

In this annunciation, Luke makes clear that God comes with good news for ordinary people (Mary) from little-known places (Nazareth). This king will not be born to royalty in a palace, but to common folk in a stall. Here Luke highlights the role of the Spirit, a special emphasis in his gospel.

²⁶In the sixth month [of her cousin Elizabeth's pregnancy] the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, ²⁷to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. ²⁸And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. ³⁰The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great,

and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?” ³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God. ³⁶And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. ³⁷For nothing will be impossible with God.” ³⁸Then Mary said, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” Then the angel departed from her.

“Mary, Did you Know”

Mary, Did you Know is a Christmas song with lyrics written by **Mark Lowry** (Best known as a member of the Gaither Vocal Band) The words were put to music by Buddy Greene.¹ It was originally recorded by Christian recording artist **Michael English** on his self-titled debut solo album in 1991 (English and Lowry were both members of the Gaither Vocal Band at the time).

The song has since gone on to become a modern Christmas classic. It has been recorded by many artists over the years across multiple genres.

- 1997 duet with Kenny Rogers & Wynonna Judd
- 1999 Reba McEntire
- 1999 Natalie Cole
- 2004 Glen Campbell
- 2005 Clay Aiken
- 2012 Cee Lo Green

Since English debuted the song, it has been recorded by over 500 artists, both secular and Christian.²

This song didn’t start out as a song. It started in 1984 when Mark Lowry was asked to write a Christmas pageant for his church. As he wrote the dialogue, Mark imagined having a conversation with Mary as she was holding baby Jesus in her arms.³

Here’s how the songwriter Mark Lowry describes it himself: (From “Story behind the song: ‘Mary did you know?’”)

I was asked to write the program for [the church’s pageant.]

As I wrote the ‘speaking parts’ I began to think about Mary. I have always been fascinated with the concept that God came to earth.

As [I thought about] the manger scene, I began to think about the power, authority and majesty she cradled in her arms. Those little lips were the same

¹ Wikipedia entry on “Mary, Did you know?”

² Tyler Scarlett, “The Story Behind the Carol: ‘Mary, Did You Know?’” Posted Dec. 1, 2013. <https://www.forestbaptistchurch.org/the-story-behind-the-carol-mary-did-you-know/>

³ Theology of Work article

lips that had spoken worlds into existence. All of those things were contained in the young child lying quietly on her bosom. Even now, he was the very one who had given life to his mother, Mary.

I began writing a list of questions I would like to ask Mary if I could sit down with her — questions such as, ‘Mary, do you know who is in your arms?’

‘Did you know the one who holds creation together, and the one who holds you together is lying helpless in the manger?’

‘Did you know that your baby boy will walk on water, give sight to a blind man and calm a storm at sea with his hand?’”

The Writing of the Tune

Lowry carried his lyrics with him for the next seven years. In 1991, he asked his good friend, Buddy Greene, to write suitable music for his poem.

Greene described the next step: “Mark handed me his lyrics, and I held on to them for about two weeks. One day I pulled them out and looked at them. They seemed to suggest a minor key approach to writing an accompaniment. I completed the musical setting in about 30 minutes. I called Mark at his home in Georgia and on the phone played and sang the song to him. He was ecstatic! He said, ‘That’s it!’

Two weeks later, we met in Mark’s hotel room in Nashville where we recorded the song on a small portable machine. It was then taken to Michael English who was preparing to make an album. He was the first person to record *Mary, Did You Know?*

The song’s popularity over so many years and across so many different genres shows that it captures for many the story of Christmas—the wonder of Jesus’ birth, the mystery of the incarnation—of God choosing to be born as one of us--and Mary’s role as the mother of Jesus.

Controversy about the Song

In what seems an odd reaction, especially given that the song was written by a Christian and had its origin as dialogue in a Christmas pageant, some people have become very upset about the lyrics of the song.

One writer even slammed the song in an article entitled, “**Why ‘Mary Did You Know’ Is The Most Biblically Illiterate Christmas Tune**”⁴

- Is that article title just an editor stirring up something to get you to read or click on the story?
- The tone of these kinds of articles comes from (in my view) a touchy or defensive posture that also includes the misguided assumption that this song is some kind

⁴ Holly Scheer, Dec. 21, 2016 in *The Federalist*. <http://thefederalist.com/2016/12/21/mary-know-biblically-illiterate-christmas-tune/>

of academic paper asserting the theological position that Mary knew nothing about her role or about Jesus. **It's a song!**

I think they're missing the point—that the songwriter is inviting us to wonder or ponder along with Mary at who and what this child shall become. The song isn't a theological denial of who Jesus was and is. The song's point isn't to cast doubt on Mary or suggest she was either clueless about or resistant to her role as the mother of Jesus.

Luke chapter 2 tells the story of the visit of the shepherds to the manger:

¹⁷When they [the shepherds] saw this, they made known what had been told them about this child; ¹⁸and all who heard it were amazed at what the shepherds told them. ¹⁹But Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart.

I think the songwriter is creatively or poetically inviting us into this time of pondering with Mary—to think about who and what Jesus will become. I think the songwriter's aim is to invite us into theological wonder—to marvel at the grace of God, who chose an unmarried peasant girl to be the bearer of God and who continually works in surprising ways and who chose to come in human form to be as one of us, to save us.

What *did* Mary know?

The angel Gabriel said, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.” ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”

- She knew from the visit and message of the angel Gabriel that **she was chosen** for this special task—to bear a son who would be a savior to all. (Luke 1)
 - ²⁸And [the angel Gabriel] came to her and said, “Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.”
- This was initially confusing to her (how could it not be?!):
 - ²⁹But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be.
- Still, she listened to what he said about her being chosen by God:
 - ³⁰The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.
- And about her role and about who Jesus would become:
 - ³¹And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. ³²He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. ³³He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.”
- She had questions—who wouldn't?

- ³⁴Mary said to the angel, “How can this be, since I am a virgin?”
 - ³⁵The angel said to her, “The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be holy; he will be called Son of God.”
- Whatever mix of understanding, knowledge, confusion, and faith Mary had, **she displayed a remarkable openness or receptivity to God’s activity in her life.** She was receptive to this call—to God’s call to be the mother of Jesus, saying, ‘Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word’ (Luke 1:38).
 - What a remarkable transition this is! To use the word *transition* is actually understating it; it’s not really a transition, but a *transformation*. Think about what Luke describes with such concise brevity over just 3 verses:
 - V. 34: Mary says in response to Gabriel: “How can this be?”
 - She is incredulous and perplexed
 - V. 35: This verse is Gabriel’s description of God’s Spirit at work in her. He also provides a tangible sign—that her relative Elizabeth, who has been barren and is now in her old age—she is 6 months pregnant. Gabriel declares, “Nothing will be impossible with God.”
 - V. 36: Mary: “Here am I. Let it be with me according to your word.”
- As described in three verses, Mary is transformed from startled and perplexed to hearing and absorbing what Gabriel has said, to remarkably receptive to God choosing her.

After this, she has an additional response: She responds to God with praise in her own song. A bit later in Luke. . .

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord,
my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
for you, Lord, have looked with favor on your lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed (Luke 1:46-48).

Her song of praise shows that she understood what God was doing in and through her—an ordinary young woman and yet chosen by God for this role.

- God is the one who has chosen her; God has looked upon her with favor
- God acts with both strength and mercy; God has lifted her up

Thanks be to God for Mary. Thanks for her openness or receptivity to God’s call. Thanks for her courage and trust to step out, even when she may not have fully understood: “Let it be with me according to what you have said” (Luke 1:38)

Thanks be to God for poets and writers, musicians and artists, thinkers and pray-ers who help us ponder anew who Jesus is and how we may invite him into our lives.