

1 Samuel 2:1-10

Luke 1:39-56

December 19, 2021

Fourth Sunday of Advent

Preached by Philip Gladden at the Wallace Presbyterian Church, Wallace, NC

WHAT DO YOU KNOW THIS CHRISTMAS?

Let us pray: Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, our rock and our redeemer. Amen.

On Monday, June 25, 1973, White House Counsel John Dean began his testimony before a Senate Select Committee that came to be known as the Watergate Committee. Dean took two days to read his opening statement, then began to answer questions. On Friday, June 29, 1973, Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee asked his famous question, “What did the president know, and when did he know it?” Although Senator Baker had hoped to protect President Nixon by demonstrating that it was his aides and not the President himself who were at fault, John Dean used the senator’s question to explain how President Nixon was completely involved in everything Watergate. Senator Baker’s question became one of the most consequential questions asked in political history – “What did the president know, and when did he know it?”¹

In 2002, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld made the following remarks when commenting on the Iraq war and the possibility of the existence of weapons of mass destruction: “There are known knowns – there are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns – that is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don’t know we don’t know.”²

In retrospect, we say, “If I had only known then what I know now,” which is really just another way to say, “Hindsight is 20/20.” Well, that saying certainly took on a whole new meaning after last year, didn’t it? Near the end of 2019, people were making jokes about the coming New Year: “On January 1 nobody will have to wear glasses, because everyone will see 2020 . . . Next year we should be able to solve all of our problems because we will all see 2020” . . . and so forth. But we know how that turned out, don’t we? Instead of 2020 making the future more clear and the present more understandable, the COVID-19 pandemic clouded our vision and shook our certainties . . . and the known knowns and the known unknowns are still with us. And what’s most distressing of all for so many people are the unknown unknowns, what we don’t know we don’t know as we finish out 2021 and head into 2022.

Someone recently asked me, “Would you rather know when you’re going to die or how you’re going to die?” When I said, “Neither one,” he said, “No, you have to pick one” and I said, “No, I don’t.” He told me he would like to know how he is going to die. That way he could avoid certain situations and things that might lead to that kind of death (as if we have that kind of power!). I told him I thought knowing either one – when or how – would end up controlling your present life so much that you wouldn’t be able to enjoy the living you have left. So, when you think about, maybe sometimes it’s not so bad to have some unknowns (whether known or unknown) in our lives.

A year ago tomorrow, on the Fourth Sunday of Advent 2020, I preached a sermon from these same verses in Luke, Chapter 1. The title of *that* sermon was “Mary, Did You Know?” The introduction was based on the popular Christmas song by the same title. Here’s what I said in 2020:

In 1984, Mark Lowry was asked to write a Christmas program for his church. As he wrote the speaking parts for the different characters, he got to wondering what Mary knew. In a later interview, he said, “I just tried to put into words the unfathomable. I started thinking of the questions I would have for her if I were to sit down and have coffee with Mary. You know, ‘What was it like raising God? What did you know? What didn’t you know?’”

Lowry held on to the words he wrote for seven years. In 1991, he asked his friend Buddy Greene to write music for the lyrics. Greene said he looked at the lyrics about two weeks later, decided to write in a minor key, and within thirty minutes had written the music. Two weeks after that, Lowry and Greene recorded the song and took it to Michael English (of the Northeast Community just east of Wallace) who was the first person to release the song “Mary, Did You Know?”³

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've kissed the face of God.

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 Oh, Mary, did you know?

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, we might paraphrase Senator Howard Baker’s famous question and ask, “What did Mary know and when did she know it?” As it turns out, what Mary knew before Jesus was even born was quite a bit. Mary knew she was engaged to Joseph but not married. Mary knew she was a virgin. Mary knew she had found favor with God. Mary knew she would conceive and bear a son. Mary knew she would name him Jesus. Mary knew her son would be great and called Son of the Most High. Mary knew her son would be given the throne of his ancestor David, would reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there would be no end. Mary knew

her son would be called Son of God. Mary knew her kinswoman Elizabeth, who was old and barren, was pregnant. Mary knew all these things because she was told most of them by an angelic messenger from God.

But Mary not only knew things about her current situation, she knew in her heart of hearts that God would be true to his promises for the future. No wonder her cousin Elizabeth said of Mary, “And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord.” (Luke 1:45)

Mary’s beautiful song of praise, which we know as the “Magnificat,” rejoices in God and all of the things God has done in the past, God is doing in the present, and God will do in the future. Certainly, as a faithful Jewish woman, Mary would know about God’s mighty deeds and acts of love for his people Israel. Certainly, her knowledge of what God had done in the past helped her trust what God was doing in her present – “Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” (Luke 1:38) But what about the future? How could Mary know what was to come for her and her son? How could Mary trust God to do what he promised to do through her son – God’s only Son – Jesus?

That’s exactly what Mary does, however. She trusts God so much because of what God has done in the past, she can sing of the future as if God’s promises have already been fulfilled: “**He has shown strength** with his arm; **he has scattered** the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; **he has brought down** the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; **he has filled** the hungry with good things to eat, and **sent** the rich away empty; **he has helped** his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever.” (Luke 1:51-55) Mary was so certain of God’s faithfulness, she sang about things to come as if they had already happened.

You can search the Old Testament and find story after story that supports Mary’s confidence in God. For that matter, you can read the story of Jesus’s birth, life, ministry, death, and resurrection and realize that what Mary sang about in that Judean town in the hill country in fact happened. Read the book of Acts and the letters and scour church history and the lives of men and women of faith and you will find story after story about God doing what Mary sang about in that Judean town in the hill country.

Far be it from me to think I could ever improve on the lyrics of “Mary, Did You Know?” But what if we wrote out some of the lines in the style of Mary’s Magnificat that she sang when she visited Elizabeth?

Mary did you know that your baby boy walked on water?
Mary did you know that your baby boy saved our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy came to make you new?
This child that you’ve delivered delivered you.

Mary did you know that your baby boy gave sight to a blind man?
Mary did you know that your baby boy calmed a storm with His hand?
Did you know that your baby boy walked where angels trod?

Mary, did you know?
The blind saw, the deaf heard, and the dead lived again
The lame leapt, the dumb spoke the praises of the Lamb

A year ago, I ended my sermon this way: Mary knew the most important thing of all. Mary knew that what was happening in her life was God's doing, even if she didn't know the details in advance. She knew enough to trust God with her life and her future, so she said, "Here I am . . . let it be to me according to your word." This Christmas, what do **you** know?

A year later, that is still a very important question. You know what you know about the way things are right now in our country and in our world. You know what you know about the way things are in your life right now. You probably know what you don't know for the coming year – about your health, about the economy, about the COVID virus, about the political divisions in our country, about natural disasters, about threats foreign and domestic. And, of course, there are always the unknown unknowns . . . the things that can keep you up at night, that can shake your foundations.

So, what do you know this Christmas? Do you know God who loved us so much that he sent his only Son? Do you know Jesus Christ who lived among us full of grace and truth, who knows you and loves you and calls you to follow him? Do you know of times in your own life when God was faithful and saw you through when you needed him most? Do you know that God is with you – and will be with you, Emmanuel – even if you don't know all of the details of what's to come?

If you don't know that this Christmas, God is waiting for you to know. And, if you do know that this Christmas, join with Mary and let your soul magnify the Lord and your spirit rejoice in God your Savior.

Here's a song of praise, "Magnificat," by Brian Yapko, an attorney in Santa Fe, New Mexico.

Praise Him for the lightning in the gale,
For balmy winds, for crystals in the snow.
Wonder at the gaudy peacock's tail,
Observe how huge the elephant can grow!

The turtledove, the maculate giraffe,
The leopard's feral stealth, the eagle's wing,
The neighing of the horse, the dolphin's laugh;
The joy in God which once made Mary sing.

Praise God for all the miracles to be!
The enemy who may become a friend;
The captive who yearns one day to be free;
The woes of life we all hope to transcend.

Praise God for each new morning that we greet!
And praise Him for creation left undone.
God's work is left for humans to complete
To follow in the footsteps of His Son.

We all are burdened by life's heavy chain
And wearied by this broken road we trod.
But as I live I will not bow to pain.
My soul sings the magnificence of God!⁴

Let us pray: O God of Elizabeth and Mary, you visited your servants with news of the world's redemption in the coming of the Savior. Make our hearts leap with joy, and fill our mouths with songs of praise, that we may announce glad tidings of peace, and welcome the Christ in our midst. Amen.

NOTES

¹Peter Grier, "Howard Baker: the real story of his famous Watergate question," June 26, 2014, *The Christian Science Monitor* at www.csmonitor.com.

²Dan Zak, "'Nothing ever ends': Sorting through Rumsfeld's knowns and unknowns," July 1, 2012 at www.washingtonpost.com.

³Two sources: "Story behind the song: 'Mary did you know?'" November 28, 2014 at www.staugustine.com and "Mary, Did You Know?" at www.en.wikipedia.org.

⁴Brian Yapko, "Magnificat," April 3, 2021, The Society of Classical Poets at www.classicalpoets.org.