

Isaiah 9:2-7

Christmas Eve

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

Luke 2:1-20

December 24, 2015

DID YOU KNOW?

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.

For the past couple of Sundays, the Alternative Sunday School Class has been hearing the stories behind some of our favorite Christmas carols and songs. I asked class members to e-mail or text me the names of Christmas songs they would like to learn about (but not “Grandma Got Run Over By a Reindeer” or the barking dogs singing “Jingle Bells”!).

Last week I got an unidentified text — no name, just a phone number. I wasn’t at all thinking about our Sunday School class or the fact that I had asked folks to let me know what songs they wanted to hear about. The “anonymous” text simply said, “I want to learn about ‘Mary, Did You Know?’” I thought, “What an interesting text!” so I responded with, “OK, what would you like to learn about ‘Mary, Did You Know?’ and, by the way, who are you?” Pretty quickly came the reply: “In our Sunday School class on Sunday. This is Mary Whitfield.” The only other request I got was from Rick Batchelor, who mentioned it would be interesting to learn about “Mary, Did You Know?” Guess which song we heard about in our class on Sunday morning? After class, I asked Mary Whitfield, “Mary, did you know all that?” HaHa!

Did you know?

* “Mary, Did You Know?” was first recorded by Michael English from the Northeast community here in Duplin County. In fact, Mark Lowry had Michael English in mind when he first wrote the lyrics in 1984.

* “Mary, Did You Know?” was the song selected by Jordan Smith, the eventual winner of NBC TV’s “The Voice” for his semi-final performance.

* “Mary, Did You Know?” was written as a result of Mark Lowry being asked to write a Christmas program for his church. Here are some of his comments from an interview about the song:

“My pastor asked me to write the Christmas program for our church, called The Living Christmas Tree, and I wrote some monologues to go in between the songs. I started thinking and wondering if Mary realized the power, authority, and majesty that she cradled in her arms that first Christmas. I wondered if she realized those little hands were the same hands that scooped out oceans and formed rivers. I just tried to put into words the unfathomable.”

Lowry went on to say, “I knew it would be a song some day. Others had tried to put music to it but whenever I handed anyone the lyric to try to write the music to it I would tell them that I would be the one to decide if there was a marriage . . . the lyric is

my baby.” In 1991, Buddy Greene worked on the music after Lowry wrote down the words for him. On a Monday morning he called and sang the song to Mark Lowry over the phone. Lowry did say that Gloria Gaither pointed out that the song should have been called, “Mary, Do You Know?” but, “I told her, my way sings better!”¹

When Republican Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee served as the ranking minority member of the Senate Watergate Committee investigating President Richard Nixon, he famously asked out loud, “What did the President know and when did he know it?” Mark Lowry said, “I started thinking of the questions I would have for [Mary] 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?’”

So, on this Christmas Eve, we might ask: What did Mary know and when did she know it?

Mary knew what the angel Gabriel told her: you will conceive and bear a son and name him Jesus; he will be great and called the Son of the Most High; the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end; the child will be holy and will be called Son of God. (Luke 1:26-38)

Mary knew what her old cousin Elizabeth told her: blessed is the fruit of your womb; you are the mother of my Lord; you are blessed because you believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was prophesied. (Luke 1:39-45)

Mary knew what she had to sing about when she praised God: through this miracle God had done great things; showing mercy and strength, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; bringing down the powerful from their thrones; lifting up the lowly; filling the hungry with good things; sending the rich away empty; helping his servant Israel in remembrance of his mercy, according to his promises. (Luke 1:46-56)

Mary knew what the shepherds told her: that the birth of her first-born son was good news of great joy for all the people; that he was the Savior, Messiah, Lord. (Luke 2:8-20)

Mary knew what faithful Simeon told her eight days later in the Temple: this baby is God’s salvation; a light for revelation to the Gentiles and for glory to Israel; destined for the rising and falling of may in Israel; a sign that will be opposed so the inner thoughts of many will be revealed. (Luke 2:21-35)

Mary knew what Jesus himself told her when he was twelve years old, and she and Joseph found him listening to the teachers and asking them questions: “Did you not know that I must be in my Father’s house?” (Luke 2:41-51)

And Mary treasured all these words and pondered them in her heart. That word, “pondered,” has always captured my imagination. Mary did more than just give all of these reports a passing thought. “Ponder” means to weigh in your mind, to deliberate about, to consider quietly, soberly, deeply. What parent-to-be hasn’t pondered all of the things surrounding his or her child? What parent doesn’t continue to ponder experiences and feelings and mistakes and joys and sorrows, no matter how old his or her child gets to be?

Mary had a lot to ponder. Mary had a lot to know. Not only did she have to deal with all of the praise and glory and promises from Gabriel and Elizabeth and the shepherds and Simeon, she also had to ponder these words:

* Mary knew what her child's future would hold. In the temple on Jesus' dedication day, Simeon told Mary, "This child is destined for the falling and the rising of many in Israel, and to be a sign that will be opposed so that the inner thoughts of many will be revealed — and a sword will pierce your own soul also." (Luke 2:34-35)

* Mary knew what the neighbors thought. When her boy grew up and began his ministry and came home one day, his family heard about it and went out "to restrain him, for people were saying, "He has gone out of his mind." (Mark 3:20-21)

* Mary knew what it was like to be mystified by her own son. When the crowd said to Jesus, "Your mother and your brothers and sisters are outside, asking for you," Jesus replied, "Who are my mother and my brothers? Whoever does the will of God is my brother and sister and mother." (Mark 3:31-35)

* Mary knew the heartbreak of watching her son die. As she stood near the cross with her sister and some other women and the disciple Jesus loved, Jesus looked down at her from the cross and said, "Woman, here is your son," and he said to the disciple, "Here is your mother." (John 19:25-27)

Oh, Mary knew a lot! But Mary knew something else that she must have pondered over all of her life. In Sunday's cantata, Susie Gaus told Mary's story and said, "That's what I said to myself . . . 'God loves you, Mary. Do not be afraid.' Over and over. It's what I said to myself as I realized more and more who my Son was and what his life would be like. It's what I said to myself as I watched him walk away from home the last time; as I heard the rumblings against him in Jerusalem; as I watched him be mocked and tortured. It's what I said, in quiet wonder, when I heard the good news that he had risen from the dead! There were times it was hard to believe. I wish I could say I never doubted or felt unworthy or afraid again. But it's true of all of us, that side of being human. That's why I like to tell this part of the story, because just as much as fear and doubt are true for all of us, the angel's words are also true. Just like Jesus came to me, he comes to you; you, who are highly favored. Do not be afraid."²

In her book of Advent and Christmas poems, Ann Weems writes about "Mary, Nazareth Girl."

Mary, Nazareth girl:
What did you know of ethereal beings
 with messages from God?
What did you know of men
 when you found yourself with child?
What did you know of babies,
 you, barely out of childhood yourself?

God-chosen girl:
What did you know of God
 that brought you to this stable
 blessed among women?
Could it be that you had been ready
 waiting
 listening
 for the footsteps
 of an angel?
Could it be there are messages for us
 if we have the faith to listen?³

On this Christmas Eve, did you know that the babe asleep in the manger grew up and died to save us from our sins?

On this Christmas Eve, did you know that the babe asleep in the manger and wrapped in swaddling cloths grew up and died to save us from our sins and was raised from the dead by the power of God's Holy Spirit?

On this Christmas Eve, did you know that the babe asleep in the manger and wrapped in swaddling cloths grew up and died to save us from our sins and was raised from the dead by the power of God's Holy Spirit and was given the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue should confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father?

On this Christmas Eve, did you know that God loves you? Do not be afraid!

Let us pray: Who are we, Lord God, that you should come to us? Yet you have visited your people and redeemed us in your Son. As we celebrate his birth, make our hearts leap for joy at the sound of your Word. Fill us with your grace, so that with Mary, we may rejoice in your salvation and embrace your will. We ask this through him whose coming is certain, whose day draws near, your Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

NOTES

¹ "The Story Behind the Song: 'Mary, Did You Know?'" at www.absolutelygospel.com.

²Lloyd Larson, *A Noel Celebration*, 2015 Lorenz Publishing Company, a division of The Lorenz Corporation, p. 26.

³Ann Weems, *Kneeling in Bethlehem* (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1980), p. 25.