

“Mary Didn’t Know”

Luke 2:1-20

Almost 40 years ago, songwriter Mark Lowry scribbled down some lyrics for a Christmas song about Mary, the mother of Jesus. After all, people were canting carols set in the bleak midwinter about herald angels singing from the realms of glory while shepherds watched their flocks by night. And, of course, about sweet, little Jesus born on this silent night. Few carols paid homage to the teenage girl who had a baby 2,000 years ago in a manger in the little town of Bethlehem, Judea.

The song that Lowry wrote reached Number 6 on *CCM Magazine’s* Adult Contemporary Chart. At the time, Lowry was with the Gaither Vocal Band, and he recorded his song on their 1998 Christmas album, *Still the Greatest Story Ever Told*. Today, the song has become a modern Christmas classic, recorded by hundreds of artists over the years, and different versions have periodically reached the top 10 in the Billboard R&B and Holiday charts.

His song consists of a series of questions.

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?

Let's answer Lowry's question. Did Mary know?

No, Mary didn't know.

She was a young girl, probably, mid-teens. She had a boyfriend, and they were engaged. But she and Joseph had never been intimate. They didn't live together (Matthew 1:18). They had not known each other in the biblical sense. The Bible is emphatic about this. Twice in our text, Mary is described as a virgin, and once, she throws up an argument against Gabriel, the angelic messenger, saying his proposal is absurd. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (v. 34).

Of the four gospel writers, leave it to a doctor (Luke) to violate doctor/patient confidentiality protocols and spill the beans. She was a virgin — then she wasn't. Matthew adds to the scandal by noting that when Joseph realized that his gal evidently had a "cheatin' heart," he was inclined "to dismiss her quietly" rather than "expose her to public disgrace" (Matthew 1:19).

But after a conversation with an unspecified "angel of the Lord," he up and married her ("he took her as his wife," Matthew 1:24), and then waited for the blessed event covered so dramatically in Dr. Luke's next chapter. Joseph is a good guy, but let's face it, he doesn't get much ink in the New Testament, and when he does, everyone knows he's not really Joseph. He's Mr. Mary.

So, this is the Mary of the gospel reading today, who — if we believe Da Vinci's version of the annunciation — is sitting in the Florentine courtyard of her palace, nestled in a Tuscan forested background. She is seated at a lectern with the Hebrew Scriptures before her. She greets with an upraised hand the angel Gabriel, who bows toward the maiden, offering a lily.

Mary and Gabriel have a brief conversation in which the angel lets her in on a shocking and disturbing secret, and now the question can again be asked: *What did Mary know?*

Mary Didn't Know What Was Going On

Sometimes, we don't either.

Have you ever been in a huge mall or museum looking at a "You Are Here" sign, but you still don't know where you are? Even if you do know where you are, thanks to the sign, you still might not be clear on where you're going or how to get there.

This describes Mary as she listens to Gabriel.

All she knew was that an angel just told her she was going to have a baby. She didn't know *why*. She certainly didn't know *how* since, as she told Gabriel, she'd never slept with anyone.

We, too, are often confused as to why we are in our present predicaments. We ask ourselves, "How long am I going to be working at this dead-end job?" Or "Why am I still in this relationship?" Or "When am I going to figure out what to do with my life?"

Often, like Mary, we're clueless.

The good news is that *it's alright*.

God sometimes has this annoying habit of dealing with us on a "need to know" basis.

Sometimes we don't need to know what lies ahead — at least not yet. One of the hard things about being a follower of Jesus is that, often, there's a sort of *built-in ambiguity*. But it's okay. We live with uncertainty.

Mary may have suspected that uncertainty would be the new normal as she moved ahead from this watershed moment.

Mary Didn't Know That She Was "Favored"

Sometimes we forget this, too.

Verse 48 reminds us of her favored status: "For he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant."

The Bible doesn't tell us why, specifically, Mary was chosen for this role from among scores of other possible candidates. Mary did have a heart that was inclined toward God. She was a girl with a remarkable willingness to risk everything, even her life, to comply with the will of God. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word," she said (v. 38).

Yet Mary is not favored because of her perfection or unwavering faith, but rather because of the faithfulness of God. She is invited into God's plan not because of her achievements, status or goodness, but rather because God chose to lift up the lowly (Luke 1:52).

Mary had the good sense to see the hand of God in what was happening to her. She didn't bemoan her circumstances; she rejoiced in them, knowing that what looked like a calamity to others, was actually a sign that God was paying attention to her!

Mary Didn't Know How She Was Going to Suffer

Most parents don't. She didn't know that:

- from this point on, her house would be a mess;
- her son would be brilliant;
- there would be an endless stream of questions and, even worse, answers;
- things wouldn't always go according to plan;

- she'd have trouble bonding with this child;
- the question of which parent Jesus looks like would be an awkward one;
- from this day forward, she would worry constantly;
- she'd make so many mistakes;
- the night before delivery was the last night in a month of Sabbaths that she'd get any sleep;
- the laundry never ends; and
- so many friends and aunties would tell her what the child should or shouldn't eat.

Yes, Mary suffered. She didn't know what it would be like raising a gifted and talented boy.

Once, when Jesus was 12, they'd gone down to Jerusalem for Passover. They were there with a contingent from Nazareth. When they left to return home, they did so without Jesus, thinking he was with some of his friends and their parents.

But he wasn't.

Mary suffered. She had just lost track of the Son of the Most High God! She and Joseph raced back to Jerusalem. It took them an entire day to get back to the city. Once in the city, they looked everywhere. They contacted the police and filled out a Missing Person Report. An Amber Alert was issued. Nothing.

It took Mary *three days* to find her Son and regain custody of the Messiah, the One who would "save his people from their sins" (Matthew 1:21). He was in the temple! She must have screamed. Three days in the city hunting for this child! "What? You're the Son of God and you couldn't figure out a way to let me know where you were?"

“Why were you searching for me?” he asked. “Didn’t you know I had to be in my Father’s house?”

His parents just stared at him: **“But they did not understand what he said to them” (2:49).**

Mary suffered, but she also “treasured all these things in her heart” (2:52).

Years later, she and her son attended a wedding in Cana, not far from Nazareth. When the wine ran out, she had a sharp exchange with her son. They clearly were not on the same page.

And less than a thousand days later, she was standing at the site of a crucifixion, and she witnessed what no mother should witness.

Yes, Mary suffered.

Mary Did Know She Was a “Servant of the Lord”

In those words (v. 38), we learn much about a woman who is otherwise something of an enigma.

As one scholar has noted: “The Bible is over 95 percent male oriented. Of 1,426 names in the Bible only 111 names are women’s. . . . Mary of Nazareth, however, is among the women most mentioned in the Bible. She is an exception to the rule and almost for that reason an exceptional woman.”

She is a *woman*, which meant in those days she was a second-class citizen. She and her people were subjects of imperial Rome. She was a Jewish woman, the daughter of Joachim and Anna, and therefore subject to Torah law and regulations. As a young girl she would have heard the Hebrew Scriptures. Clearly, when she was confronted by the angel Gabriel, she had a heart that was disposed to spiritual things.

Mary was a ponderer, twice told that she “kept all these things, pondering them in her heart” (Luke 2:19, 51). It’s possible that she knew how to read. She thought about her experiences long and deeply — and her *Magnificat* shows that she had deep insight into what God was doing in her.

Mary knew she could trust in God, that this pregnancy was possibly going to be scandalous, and that her son was going to be someone special. But she didn’t have clarity. Gabriel told her, “You will name him Jesus. He 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. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end” (Luke 1:31-33). But what did all this mean?

Luke 2:1-20 . . . ¹In those days a decree went out from Emperor Augustus that all the world should be registered. ²This was the first registration and was taken while Quirinius was governor of Syria. ³All went to their own towns to be registered. ⁴Joseph also went from the town of Nazareth in Galilee to Judea, to the city of David called Bethlehem, because he was descended from the house and family of David. ⁵He went to be registered with Mary, to whom he was engaged and who was expecting a child. ⁶While they were there, the time came for her to deliver her child. ⁷And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in bands of cloth, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn. ⁸In that region there were shepherds living in the fields, keeping watch over their flock by night. ⁹Then an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified.

¹⁰But the angel said to them, "Do not be afraid; for see — I am bringing you good news of great joy for all the people: ¹¹to you is born this day in the city of David a Savior, who is the Messiah, the Lord. ¹²This will be a sign for you: you will find a child wrapped in bands of cloth and lying in a manger." ¹³And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host, praising God and saying, ¹⁴"Glory to God in the highest heaven, and on earth peace among those whom he favors!" ¹⁵When the angels had left them and gone into heaven, the shepherds said to one another, "Let us go now to Bethlehem and see this thing that has taken place, which the Lord has made known to us." ¹⁶So they went with haste and found Mary and Joseph, and the child lying in the manger. ¹⁷When they 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. ²⁰The shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God for all they had heard and seen, as it had been told them.

May the peace of God . . .

“Mary Did You Know?” (Solo)