

What Mary Knew
Luke 1:26-38, 46b-55
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Given the choice, what's that **one** Christmas tune that you'd like to strike from the canon? You know the one. That song you've heard 10,000 times on the radio or while shuffling from one corner of the shopping center to the next. The one that gets stuck in your head and makes you scowl like the Grinch glaring down at Whoville.

Maybe it's that one with the Chipmunks squeaking out their hopes for a "hula hoop."

Or the sultry stylings of the latest "Santa, Baby" cover.

Maybe all you want for Christmas is a break from that Mariah Carey classic.

Or a conclusion to that annual debate over the lyrics of "Baby, It's Cold Outside."

Well, for my cousin Mary, that song happens to be . . . you can probably guess it . . . "Mary, Did You Know?" The number of times she's been serenaded with improvised versions of that tune. She's taken to just stopping our family mid-song with a firm: "Yeah, I know." As you can imagine, the joke's been worn a little thin over the years.

And, look, my cousin's personal vendetta aside, there is something genuinely perplexing about the lyrics of "Mary, Did You Know?"—right? It's been dubbed the "The Mansplaining Carol" for good reason.

I mean—did she *know*?

Channeling the shade I can only hope Mary would throw in response, one historian tweeted: "Thanks for the info, suburban carolers, but THE ANGEL GABRIEL HIMSELF told me more than two millennia ago, so, you know, I'm good!"

Yet as I read today's passage, I *am* left wondering—not about *whether* Mary knew—but about *what* exactly she treasured and pondered in her heart in the years that followed this life-altering encounter.

What did Mary know that I've forgotten?

I don't need to tell you how difficult a year this has been. And if I'm honest, the Christmas spirit has been hard to come by. I've heard few Christmas songs (even the ones that annoy me!) because I'm so rarely in my car listening to the radio anymore. And I haven't walked through a shopping center in . . . well . . . I don't know when. And those memories of all the cousins playfully teasing each other—they feel distant this season. It's going to be a long time before we gather together again.

So I've come to our passage today to ask you, Mary, *what did you know* that made you say yes to the Spirit's dramatic interruption of your life?

What did you know that gave you the faith to believe in the impossible?

Because most days I feel a little more like Zechariah just a few verses before you—a man whose doubt in God's promise rendered him silent—even as he saw hope growing in his wife Elizabeth's belly.

I see hope growing too. A second vaccine on the way. Some recognition of the reality that this election is over. Both 2020 and the cruelty of this current administration will soon be behind us.

And yet, no sooner do I open my mouth in gratitude than am I overwhelmed by extraordinary weight of all we've lost along the way.

And so I see Mary here and I sit stunned in wonder. Mary, what *did* you know?

You were a poor peasant girl. For you, pregnancy was literally a life-threatening condition. At best, you could hope to survive as a social pariah. And in the small glimpse of your life that scholars have reconstructed for us, I've seen nothing but abject poverty. Grueling and unending domestic labor just to maintain subsistence. In all likelihood, your betrothed was a day laborer who traveled from the backwaters of Nazareth to the city of Sepphoris, an administrative center. There, as he toiled, Joseph would see how the other half lives—the lavishness of the elites supported by the heavy taxation on rural villages like theirs.

Mary knew that she and Joseph were subject to a brutal and exploitative economic system on occupied land. No wonder she's perplexed when the angel appears and calls her favored. I can imagine what was running through her mind: *Gabriel in Nazareth?! Me—favored?!*

There was little material evidence of that truth. Those called favored of God rarely accept the news immediately. It is truly perplexing that a God of great might would call upon the lowly.

Unless, of course, that God has every intention of subverting the order of things.

And this, I believe, is what Mary knew. That she served a faithful God who identified with those in need of liberation. A God whose vision for the world would turn it upside down and inside out until it reflects the goodness intended there all along.

A God who could call Mary of Nazareth favored? That's a God she was willing to serve. Not because she ignored the present circumstance but because she knew **Who** was present with her *in* this circumstance.

And you know what else? Mary knew to whom to turn. Still terrified, but willing to step out in faith, Mary sought out another for whom God conspired for life: Elizabeth.

So while Zechariah and I sit silently nursing our despair, for three months we listen to these women exclaim joyfully as new life stirred within them. Mary knew to turn to one who would match her

hope with her own, one who could see God's favor on this young woman from the backwoods of Nazareth.

Just a few verses beyond our passage today, Elizabeth calls Mary blessed. To bless is to call forth in gratitude the work that God is already doing. To bless is to wrap your words around and tug at what's just underneath the surface of our lives, to draw human attention toward divine possibility.

So here I am, with Zechariah, silently taking it all in. Watching what happens when, in this first-century text that would pass the Bechdel Test, these women conspire with God.

What did Mary know? Well, in response to Elizabeth's blessing, she tells us.

Well, more accurately, *and mercifully!* as if to drive any nettlesome holiday earworm from our minds, Mary *sings to us*.

"My soul magnifies the Lord,

and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior,

for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;

for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name.

His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation.

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, 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."

Mary sings. A song that in the 2,000 years since its release hasn't lost its relevance.

Mary knows that because of the child she carries, the world itself is pregnant with new possibility.

She knows that the world as it is - is not the world as it was promised to be, that the despair and doubt *to which Zechariah and I rightfully cling* will not have the final say.

She knows that when heavy hearts seal our lips that we can draw our attention to where the Spirit is already at work among us. And that gratitude might arise and inspire a blessing that might call forth a song.

Mary knows, like the priest and poet and Saint Rev. Pauli Murray, that “hope is a song in a weary throat.”

She knows the faithfulness of God, and accepts God’s invitation to co-author something new. Mary knows that she’s carrying more than a child; she’s birthing a revolution.

But, if on this fourth week of Advent, and some nine months into this pandemic, you’re tired of waiting for this revolution—I am too. If in the few times you’ve been in your car you’ve anxiously listened to NPR instead of Christmas tunes—I have been too. If you’re both relieved that the election is over but also unnerved by the reminder that our democracy is fragile and under threat—I am too. If you’re heartened by the vaccine news but know that “returning to normal” won’t solve the climate crisis, or rebuild the local businesses that have shuttered, or close the widening chasm between the haves and have nots, or dismantle institutional racism—I am right there with you.

But while it may not be as dramatic as the encounter Mary has with Gabriel, I do believe the angel’s divine invitation is interrupting our lives today. And the Spirit that Gabriel promised to her is the same one whose power her precious child would grow up to claim. And the same one he would go on to promise us. The Holy Spirit, the co-conspirator who binds us one to another and transforms the impossible.

So in the moments when despair silences you, listen to what Mary knows: draw your attention to the promises of God. Call forth blessings when you see the Spirit’s work in the life of another. And tune your ear. For as often as we bless one another in grateful recognition of what God is doing in our lives here and now, the possibilities of God’s promises will give us a song to sing.

Like Elizabeth, let’s recognize the hope that Mary is bringing into the world, even now. And yes, Mary, *this* generation calls you blessed!

And brace yourselves—for the world is about to turn. Music to my ears.

Amen.