

## **“Mary, Did You Know?”**

Date: 22 December 2019

Text: Luke 1: 26 - 56

Rev. Peter Coutts

I love the song the choir just sang—“Mary Did You Know”—and I appreciate them learning it for today. That question, I think, stands at the heart of the well-loved passage we read today. To rephrase it, “Mary, did you know what you were getting into?” I love Eugene Peterson’s translation of this passage. After announcing himself the angel says, “Mary you have nothing to fear. God has a surprise for you...” You can almost hear the angel saying, “and I think you’d better sit down for the news”. The description of the news—while profound—was pretty brief. You are pregnant. Your son will be great, called the Son of God. He will take up the kingdom of David and reign forever. A surprise indeed!

Mary did you know? Could she have anticipated the events of the year to follow? There is a counselling tool called the Holmes and Rahe Stress Test. It recognizes that different events in our lives create different degrees of stress. In the test the stressfulness of challenges are rated on a scale of 1 to 100 points. Concurrent challenges cause stress to be cumulative, so you add the points together. Well, I sort of gave the stress test to Mary, just to get a sense of the load she was under. Initially, she faced a divorce of sorts (Joseph at first was simply going to end their engagement) (73 points), but then later she faced her actual wedding (50 points). She was pregnant (40 points) – but pregnant out of wedlock in a society which would find her situation scandalous. She faced a change in residence in moving in with Joseph (20 points), had a major change in social status (18), and then there was travel for the census (13 points). Now, I’m not a woman, but it seems to me that facing a journey of about 125 km. by foot and donkey when you are 8-9 months pregnant would be worth a little more than 13 points. Especially when your husband hasn’t reserved accommodations! Add to that being mother of the Son of God! That, I think, would be right off the scale! The creators of this test say that someone undergoing this quantity of change and stress in a one year period can expect to get sick: physically and psychologically. And the best guess is that Mary at the time was probably still a teenager. An ordinary teen suddenly having this thrust upon her. And as the song reminds us, the challenges for Mary didn’t end with the end of the Christmas stories. They went on and on, even to the point of standing at the foot of the cross. “Mary, did you know?”

This makes her response all the more startling. In her great prayer of praise that we read this morning known as the Magnificat she poured out her feelings. She spoke of her joy of what God was doing both for her and her people. She spoke of her humility in being the one chosen to mother this child. She spoke of her conviction that it will all come to pass just as the angel had said. That’s obedience. And she celebrated what was happening: “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour” (1.46, 47).

How could she say these things and feel this way given everything she was facing? Well, this story shows that Mary was able to hold a much bigger view on what was happening. Surely, she must have appreciated the personal impact, but in her song of praise what she reflected on was the big picture. The words of the angel changed her individual life dramatically in an instant, but her faith held it all in perspective. Perhaps this was why she was God's favoured one. She understood there was a greater purpose in what was happening. The long awaited Messiah was on the way. The lowly were about to be lifted up by God through him. The hungry would be filled with good things. God was going to demonstrate mercy to the world, taking a 2,000 year old commitment made to Abraham and expanding it for all people in ways beyond imagination. Yes, she was at the center of the biggest story in the world, and I'm sure it was stressful. But even though her life was being turned upside down, Mary knew one thing: this was not about her. It was about what God was doing. And of all the unimaginable things: she had a part in it. She has a part in it!

So as she faced Joseph with the news, "I'm pregnant", she would know. As she heard the prophetic reactions of her sister Elizabeth and her husband Zechariah, she would know. As rumours began to circulate speculating on her pregnancy, she would know. Everything that was happening – the joyful things, the stressful stuff – all pointed back to the greater purpose of God. I think Mary could hold it all together because she knew the answer to the question, "Why?"

This story causes me to wonder about our own lives. It arises from two questions. The first question is, "Do we think Mary was the only "favoured one"?" From all we can tell from the gospels, Mary appears to have been quite ordinary. Like us. The gospels speak of her as being thoughtful, obedient, faithful, worshipful, a follower of the Law – all qualities expected in any upright Jew. Why she would be the one who had "found favour" with God and be chosen to be the mother of the Messiah is never shared with us. But I think that is exactly the point. She was common. She was ordinary. But... she was faithful, obedient. She did what God wanted her to do. In her faithfulness even able to be obedient to God in the most extraordinary, demanding and stressful situation. Is that why she had found favour with God?

That implies a second question. "Is it possible, then, that in our own way we are all favoured ones of God?" Think about it. God did not choose Mary to be the target, the sole recipient of grace, right? Rather, Mary would bear and give birth to the Messiah, and it was the Messiah who was going to change the whole world. Mary had a needed, vital, unique wonderful role. But her blessedness was in her ability to appreciate her role, see it in the larger picture, then accept and fulfill that role so that God could do something amazing in the world. If God works this way in the world – acting through our own willingness to do God's will – then might we all be God's favoured ones? Brothers and sisters of Mary?

I've known so many like this. One such person I'll call Sarah. She, at her core, understood God's central calling to us all is to love. She was obedient to that calling in all she did. She expressed that in her career as a nurse. She expressed that in her family. She expressed that in her pastoral care ministry she had in her church. One day I went to visit a woman who was dying in the hospital. When I arrived I discovered that Sarah was already there. Sarah, in her 70's, was sitting completely on the hospital bed, silently embracing the woman. I was startled by the sight, not just because that kind of thing is not done, but also because it was one of the most intimate, profound acts of care I have witnessed. The love of Christ

incarnate. Recently a young man from that congregation got married and he invited Sarah. She was astonished, having no idea why she would be chosen to attend. Well the groom told everyone why in his speech at the reception. He said how Sarah lives her Christian faith and expresses the love of Christ had a profound impact on his life, and she was one of the biggest influences that helped him become a Christian. Sarah, did you know? No. What a thing to say in public to this humble woman on the day that was focused on the bride and groom. I am sure Sarah is a favoured one of God. But like Mary, Sarah is an ordinary person, also thoughtful, obedient, faithful, worshipful. For Sarah, faith is simple. It's all about love: the love she has received through Christ and the love she is called to give.

On the fourth Sunday of Advent we light the candle of love, remembering "for God so loved the world"...remembering Jesus' ministry was marked by love...remembering our calling to love. Each of us has our reach. Each of us has our influence. Is it possible, in our own ways, we too might be favoured ones of God, that through us God might make something happen? I believe this is true. In one way Mary was truly unique, for among all the people in the world she alone was chosen to bear the Christ child, and what can be more common for a woman but to bear a child? From all we can piece together about her, she was so very normal, common, typical... so much like us.

Like Mary, God can favour us to be the means of grace. When God uses our lived faith to spark faith in a family member. When God uses our words of encouragement to foster hope in a struggling friend. When God uses our helping hand to share the burdens of another borne down by the weight of life stress. When our generosity makes all the difference in the world to a stranger in need. In our own way we too can give birth to new life.

Such a big idea: that you and I might also be favoured ones too. Let's go back to Mary's song of praise here. What was God intending to do through the Messiah, and indirectly through Mary who would give her life to raising this child? What God was intending to do was create a world of love. Recall what we heard in Mary's song. The lowly will be lifted up. The hungry will be filled. The people of God will know God's help. This was going to be God's way to show mercy and love from generation to generation to generation. But think about it. Bringing about this world of love would really take an army of Mary's, of "favoured ones", in each passing generation, to make all those things happen.

Mary, did you know?.....Did you know?