

MARY COULD HAVE SAID "NO"

Sermon, December 20, 2020

Text: Luke 1:26-38

"Mary, Did You Know?" is an almost hauntingly beautiful song originally written in 1984 by Mark Lowry, and has been performed by many artists ever since, which I won't sing for you at this time. But Olivia will. *(At this point, soprano Olivia Black sang select stanzas accompanied by her husband John on the organ; the full lyrics are reprinted below)*

MARY, DID YOU KNOW?

Words and Music by Mark Lowry and Buddy Greene, 1991

Mary, did you know that your baby boy would one day walk on water?
Mary, did you know that your baby boy would save our sons and daughters?
Did you know that your baby boy has come to make you new?
This Child that you 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 the storm with His hand?
Did you know that your baby boy has walked where angels trod;
And when you kiss your little Baby you kissed the face of God?

The blind will see, the deaf will hear, 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 would one day rule the nations?

Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect Lamb?
The sleeping Child you're holding is the great "I Am."

I don't think Mary knew all that at the time of our Gospel reading this morning! Startled out of both obscurity and innocence, this young, unmarried girl living in an otherwise unknown hillside town in the backwater region of Galilee finds herself being addressed by an angel, *"Hail, O favored one! The Lord is with you!"* Just what does that mean?

Mary was, we are told, "greatly troubled." Perhaps a better translation might be "panic stricken." In the Scriptures, encountering angels was always a frightening experience. Besides the obvious trouble of the angel's news, whenever a human being encountered an angel in the Scriptures, the angel always had to preface his message by *"Don't be afraid!"* Gabriel goes on to tell her she is a favored one of God. In retrospect, however, it seems to be a strange kind of favor. *"You will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call his name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the most High and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever and of his kingdom there will be no end."*

I know this story has become so familiar that we may miss much of the hardship and adversity which lies on the horizon of this promise. She is about to become pregnant in a way no one will find credible, and it will surely wreak havoc with her relationship to her fiancé. Now, we know from the perspective of history that Joseph would rise to the occasion; we know he, too, would receive an angelic message from God and that he would willingly go along ... he was willing to accept the circumstances come what may, knowing that God was indeed part of this; because of his trust in God, he was willing to embrace a different future from what he had planned ... and that willingness would keep them together and provide this child an earthly father. We know the child will go on to be cared for as Joseph's son ... but at this point, Mary didn't know that yet.

We also know that King Herod's raging will put the child's life at risk immediately, and they will end up as a refugee family shortly after the birth, fleeing to Egypt. We also know, but Mary did not, that when they do finally return to some normalcy in life in Nazareth, the child will not follow a path of normal expectations, and will eventually be rejected by the people among whom He was raised. We know, but Mary didn't, that as an adult He will enter the nation's capital, only to be brutally executed within the week. That is all what lies beyond the horizon of Gabriel's message. So this is what happens when you are favored by God? Some favor!

At this point Mary has no idea where this disruption of her life will lead. She knows little about what this child will become. She has no idea this child will go on to both break her heart and save her soul. At this point she doesn't even see how giving birth, at this stage in her life when she is not even married, could possibly be good news. All she does know is that God is in the midst of it all. And that is enough for her to say, *"Behold, I am the servant of the Lord. Let it be to me according to your word."*

"LET IT BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD." For Mary, these words represent readiness to be used by God no matter what. These words represent readiness to be used by God in risky and sometimes painful ways. These

words represent willingness to believe what is not readily comprehensible because it is God's message and God's word. No, she doesn't fully understand all that God is asking her to do, but she is ready to do it, anyway! She is willing to do whatever it takes to bring the Savior into her world.

These words changed not only her life, but would go on to change the life of the world. This is often what happens when we, in humble obedience to God's word, say "*Yes, Lord; let it be to me according to Your word*" Plans change. Priorities are reordered. We find ourselves living in different ways, prizing different things, looking upon rights and purposes and duties from a different perspective. And often, we find ourselves also walking roads we otherwise would not consider, enduring things we never thought we would endure. Mary most likely had her heart set on a quiet marriage in this country town, where she and Joseph would settle and raise a family of children who hopefully would be kind enough to care for Mary and Joseph in their old age, and maybe provide grandchildren Mary and Joseph could spoil. It is well that Mary could not see what lay in store for her. And maybe it is well you and I cannot see beyond our faith commitments, or we might miss out on the future joy.

Could Mary have said "No?" You have to wonder if Mary was the first woman God asked to bear the child. Might Gabriel have already approached other young Jewish women who declined the honor? It's possible. This is speculation, but I really do think she could have said, "No." In fact, my experience in ministry and what I know about God and His ways would prompt me to say, "*Of course, she could have said, 'No.'*" I can well imagine her saying, "*No, not now ... I'm really very busy, I'm about to get married, maybe some other time but now is not a good time, couldn't someone else do this?*" I'm a pastor, and I've seen many people over the years decline the special privilege of bringing the Son of God into the world where they live. I've seen many faithful people decline the privilege of bearing Christ to others in their neighborhoods or at their workplaces due to fear, or a sense of intimidation, or out of complacency. I have seen people, genuinely gifted people, people who carry the living presence of Christ within them, decline the opportunity to bring that Christ to the children of the church as Sunday School teachers or nursery care workers, or to offer their Christ-given gifts in other means of service to the church. And to be sure, I've also been frequently privileged to see faithful people, like many of you worshiping here and online this morning, say yes to God and take advantage of every opportunity you're given whatever the circumstances might be to faithfully bring the saving life of Jesus into your community, your workplaces, your homes and church ... any way you can.

Yes, I believe God allows people to say "No." He does so all the time. I believe God is a gentleman; He won't force Himself upon you. I think if Mary had said, "*No, not me!*" I think He would have honored her wishes. In some ways Mary's life would certainly have been easier if she had said 'No' and let this opportunity pass by. There would be no problems trying to explain all this to Joseph, there will be no eighty mile donkey ride to Bethlehem while fully pregnant and giving birth in less than ideal circumstances surrounded by animals. She never would have had to flee to live as a refugee in Egypt soon after giving birth in fear of King Herod murdering her child. She never would have spent a day frantically searching Jerusalem for her missing twelve-year-old son. She never would have stood at a distance weeping as she watched nails being driven into those same hands that were once little infant hands touching her face, tugging at her hair. Yes, in many ways Mary's life would have been easier, more comfortable, with a lot less drama to endure.

But oh, how much would she have missed out on? She would have never held heaven in her arms and "kissed the face of God." She would never have wondered at a crowd of shepherds excitedly speaking of angelic choirs and coming to see HER baby, who was all wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger. She never would have met the Magi who came from afar, laden with their gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh, directed by the very heavens to come to the side of this manger to see HER baby. She never would have seen her son turn water into wine at the marriage in Cana. She never would have watched Jesus grow up into manhood, never would have followed His ministry, never see the child she gave birth to go on to change the lives of others. She never would have seen His miraculous power as He opened blind eyes and deaf ears, healed the lame and even raised the dead. She wouldn't have been there to see her son resurrected from the dead and ascending into heaven. She would have had to live all her life with the knowledge that because of her decision to say "No" to God, she had **missed out** on the adventure of a lifetime and a privileged role unique in all of human history.

But she didn't miss out. Mary embraces this favor of God with those words, "LET IS BE TO ME ACCORDING TO YOUR WORD," and grace takes flesh. She does not fully comprehend it; indeed, she *can* not fully comprehend it. She simply cooperates. She trusts the word from God, accepts it, becomes obedient before it, goes on to live her life accordingly, and as a result, countless millions, even billions of lives, including ours, owe her a debt of gratitude.

God still searches for partners in whom to become flesh, partners like all of us who are asked to faithfully carry the saving presence of His Son into the world in which we live. Like Mary, let us trust the Word of God, let us accept it, let us become obedient before it, so that we, too, can bear the life of Christ in our lives and bring His love, His grace, His comfort, His good direction into our worlds.

And as with Mary, it will change not only our lives, it will change the lives of those all around us as well ... for good, and for ever.