

# Knowing

**Advent 3A**

**Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46-55)**

**Matthew 11:2-11**

**From Advent 2A- Matthew 3:1-12**

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I don't normally listen to the radio in my car except for this time of year when Magic 104.1 plays Christmas music all day, every day until the new year. One moment you are listening to Bing Crosby croon "White Christmas" and the next your ears are dazzled by Straight No Chaser doing a crazy acapella version of "The Twelve Days of Christmas." Listening to the radio was the first time I heard the controversial song "Mary, Did You Know?" (Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd)

The song is a series of questions posed to Mary such as, "Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man? That he will save our sons and daughters? Did you know that your baby boy is heaven's perfect lamb?" This Christmas song is one that people seem to either love or hate. The haters call it "mansplaining" or theologically questionable, because of course Mary 'knew.' The angel Gabriel told her point blank she would give birth to the Son of God. In the "Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55) she sings about her soul proclaiming the greatness of the Lord.

The concept of knowing seems straightforward- you either know something or you don't. But knowing is so complex that it has its own branch of philosophy. There is superficial 'knowing' and then there is deep understanding 'KNOWING.' Often we learn the hard way how much we really don't know about something or someone. While I agree that Mary knew that her son would fulfill Isaiah's prophecy of the Messiah, I wonder if she understood how that would play out. Did she know the reality of what it would mean - the struggles, the pain, and the heartbreak?

John the Baptist also knew Jesus to be the Son of God. When John was still in the womb, his mother Elizabeth felt him leap at the presence of the unborn Jesus when Mary came to visit. (Luke 1:41) As he baptized Jesus in the Jordan river, he saw God's spirit alight on Jesus and heard the voice from heaven say, "this is my Son." (Matthew 3:13-17). John roamed the countryside praising Jesus. He would point straight at Jesus saying, "Look! There is the Lamb of God." (John 1:36) He lived his entire life preparing the way for Jesus.

But then John made an enemy of the wife of Herod which landed him in prison. As he languished in his dark, damp prison cell, he was discovering how little he knew about Jesus as the Messiah. His bewilderment of what Jesus was doing prompted him to charge his disciples to ask Jesus, “Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?” (Matthew 11:3) Put another way, “If you are the Messiah I proclaimed you to be, why am I still feeling the weight of oppression? Why am I still suffering in darkness and despair? Are you really the one that will save us?”

Jesus’ response to this ‘yes’ or ‘no’ question seems like a non-answer. He responds, “The blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.” This is straight out of Isaiah talking about the Messiah. Reading between the lines, he tells John, “Yes, I am the one. Don’t be offended that I am saving the world in ways different than what you had envisioned.”

There is a large gap between knowing that Jesus is the Lamb of God and knowing how he will fulfill the role of Savior. When you read the book of Isaiah, you discover his prophecies paint different portraits of the Messiah- servant, king, and conqueror. When Isaiah talked about God coming with vengeance and terrible recompense to save them, they envisioned the Messiah as a mighty warrior. Mary sings that God brings down the powerful. John the Baptist describes the Messiah as one who would vanquish their oppressors and bring swift judgment. This is whom they thought Jesus to be- a king who would conquer the Romans and clear out the riffraff with a flamethrower. They struggled to wrap their minds around a servant Messiah who would overthrow the powerful through acts of healing and mercy. Who would stir up the people by walking among the outcasts and sinners bringing hope through compassion. Jesus’ way of showing us what is possible when we treat each other with unconditional love is more subversive than any act of violence.

John the Baptist’s struggle coming to terms with the way Jesus was working to bring justice and peace isn’t unique. We know Jesus is savior of the world, however, knowing how he will work in our lives to bring about change is an entirely different matter. We keep doing the work, living the life Christ calls us to live, but we tend to think that nothing has changed. There are still millions that go hungry. The powerful continue to oppress others wherever they can- from bullies in our daily lives to those who sit in eminent positions. So, we become restless in our waiting, asking as John did, “If you are the Messiah I proclaim you to be, why am I still feeling the weight of oppression? Why am I still suffering in darkness and despair? Are you truly the one?” Just like Mary and John, we know God’s promise of salvation, but we can’t truly know how that promise will be fulfilled until it happens.

Jesus brings light into the darkness of our lives, just not always the way we had envisioned. It is rare that he gives us blazing spotlights or flashing neon signs. More commonly it is a soft light, like the light of one candle. But even the flame of a single candle gives enough light to allow us to navigate our way through the dark. Christ’s light is the light of hope.

Hope is powerful. It helps us remember that the current way of things is not the way things have to be. Hope scatters the proud in their conceit and brings down the powerful by giving the lowly, in modern vernacular the ninety-nine percent, belief in our ability to transform our lives and the world around us. It lets us see challenges as opportunities and fuels our sense of control. When we are told that we are unworthy, hope allows us to know deep within our hearts that we are worthy simply because we are children of God.

Advent is a time of preparation for the birth of the Light of the World. But we are never fully prepared for the way that he changes us, or the ways in which he will challenge us to bring the Kingdom of God near. We can choose to trust the way God works in our lives, or we can become offended that God doesn't do what we expect him to do. This doesn't mean we can't ask questions. Notice that Jesus didn't rebuke John for wondering if he had backed the wrong horse by proclaiming Jesus as the Messiah. Asking questions, even those about things considered sacred, are an integral part of both Jewish and our Episcopal faith tradition. Questioning gives us a deeper understanding of God which allows us to grow into our faith and strengthens our spiritual awareness. We can't begin to understand if we don't ask questions.

In those times of our misgivings and disappointments, God remains steadfast in his faith in us, and his love for us. We may not know everything that God has in store for us, but we do know that Jesus was born in a lowly stable. He was born in the quiet dark of night surrounded by hay and animals. Jesus, our Savior and Redeemer, willingly becomes one of us, for us. He walks with us, joining in our weaknesses, comforting us in our despair and loneliness. His strength becomes our strength. His love fills our weary souls.

The holy night of Christ's birth is near. We wait. We wonder. We hope. We face the unknown together with Christ, enabling us to sing even as we struggle to understand, to sing along with Mary, "My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord."

Amen

## Works Cited

Kenny Rogers and Wynonna Judd. "Mary, Did You Know?" *The Gift*. 1996.