

An Everlasting Covenant

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

Luke 1:46b-55

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Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion—to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations.

For I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the Lord, my whole being shall exult in my God; for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

Luke 1:46b-55

“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.”

In 1984 Christian comedian Mark Lowry was asked to write a script for a church Christmas play. For this play he wrote out a series of questions that he would like to ask Mary. He imagined himself sitting with her over a cup of coffee and having a conversation. Being biblically literate, knowing that through the Annunciation, Luke's Gospel story when the angel Gabriel announces to Mary that she is God's favored one, and will bear a son whom she shall name Jesus, and through the Magnificat, “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,” Mark knew that Mary knew just who her son was. Yet, he asked his questions in this imaginary conversation with the idea that for all that she did know, what kind of questions did she have? As Mary rocked her baby to sleep night after night, did she not wonder what it would all mean, just exactly how her

child's Messiahship would play out in all its startling facts and particular paths? Shortly after the birth of Jesus, Luke's Gospel tells us that "Mary treasured all these things, pondering them in her heart." It seems fair for us to assume she had plenty of questions among those ponderings, as she kissed the face of God. What was it like to watch her belly grow, to feel the Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace, kick within her womb? What was it like to know that she nursed the Great I Am? As she watched him crawl, could she imagine the day he would walk on water?

By Mary's psalm of praise to God that we call the Magnificat, we know that she faithfully, gracefully, humbly, and fully accepted this amazing and incredible call on her life, and as she did so she encountered a mystery that could not be understood until it all gradually revealed itself.

Over a cup of coffee, Mark Lowry imagined asking her:

Mary did you know that your baby boy will someday 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.

His script was set to music a few years later and became the controversial hymn "Mary, Did You Know?" The music and cadence are as sweeping and tender as a lullaby, and many people have had tears in their eyes as they carefully listened to the lyrics for the imagery that comes to mind. Yet there are many detractors as this hymn is theologically akin to fingernails on a blackboard. Lutheran writer Holly Scheer declared the song "the most biblically illiterate Christmas tune," saying, "the biblical account of Christ's conception and birth shouldn't need to ask if Mary knew because the Bible plainly tells us she did." Others argue that this song is based on a redundant and condescending rhetorical question that diminishes Mary's pivotal role in God's salvation plan, thereby reducing her to a sweet but ultimately clueless new mother.

Perhaps though, it is best understood as a way for us to better grasp the mystery that is the Incarnation—Emmanuel-God with us. Part of the mystery of the Incarnation is that Mary, a young woman engaged to a local carpenter, can so easily, readily, joyfully accept Gabriel's announcement; that she can so easily, readily, joyfully accept that the expected heroic Messiah would instead come as a baby, and that she, the lowly servant, would be his mother.

As the world awaited the long promised Messiah, the expectation was of a military hero, a conqueror, a judge, and someone to be like Moses. Now, the Messiah is coming, and he comes to earth just as everyone else, a totally dependent, vulnerable tiny human being. The Son of God comes not as a mighty warrior but as the Son of Man. We know this, yet even now the idea of the Incarnation leaves us with questions to ponder. With elegant simplicity, John's Gospel begins with, 'And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth.' We know this, and we still have questions. As Joy Clarkson wrote, "The conviction that God became man, not as a mere theological concept but as a concrete event in the history of the world, is at the heart of the Christian faith. This is the mystery of the Incarnation. To say that God became man is one thing, but it is another to imagine

a young mother lulling a fussy baby to sleep, hot tears streaming from his pink, sleepy eyes, and to say that this tiny being is God incarnate, the Savior of all, the king of the universe. Each year, “Mary, Did You Know?” brings this wondrously odd aspect of our faith to Christmas radio stations and holiday playlists.”

Mary sang her own song about her little boy, and the words she sang reveal the truth that yes, in fact, Mary did know, and that she joyfully, gracefully, faithfully, eagerly accepted God’s incredulous calling for her life. The Scriptures had promised the coming of the Messiah, and hope was strong that he was coming at any time. The Messiah was going to turn the world around and deliver Israel from all her enemies. He would usher in the kingdom of God. But if those people who were so high with expectation had gone to a stable in the town of Bethlehem they might have said, “That’s it? That’s the Messiah?” No one could have guessed how this child would change the world. No one could have imagined the impact he would have on world history and the change he would make in people’s lives. No one, perhaps, except Mary, and her cousin Elizabeth.

Mary’s song is called the Magnificat because that’s the first word in the Latin translation of her song, and it’s a song that speaks of the glory and the deliverance and the salvation of God. Her song is worship, giving glory to God as she sings a song of love, a song of hope and a song of faith. Praise erupted from deep within like an overflowing fountain. Mary’s song is made up of images and references to Scriptures from Genesis, from Job, from the Psalms, and from Isaiah. The moment that she and her people had waited for so long had finally arrived. God had heard the cries and the longings of God’s beloved people and the work of mercy and salvation had begun. From the depths of her being she gives joyful expression to her amazement, her adoration, her worship and love of God that she, a lowly servant, will now be called blessed by all generations. The Mighty One had done great things for her, and holy is his name.

Just as Mary knew, we too must see the cross in the manger. We too must see the love of a newborn Messiah, the hope of those who would one day have their sight restored by her son, the peace of the One who will calm storms that rage within, and the joy of the One who came to redeem us all, to make us new, to hold us in an everlasting covenant. Amen.

(Sermon drawn upon exegetical research by Rev. Lynn Malone and Joy Clarkson, PhD)