

Here is a piece from Garrison Keillor called "The Season of Letter-Perfect Families:"

"I love reading Christmas newsletters in which the writer bursts the bounds of modesty and comes forth with one gilt-edge paragraph after another: 'Tara was top scorer on the Lady Cougars soccer team and won the lead role in the college production of ANTIGONE, which by the way, they are performing in the original Greek. Her essay on chaos theory as an investment strategy will be in the next issue of FORBES magazine, the same week she will appear as a model in VOGUE. How she does what she does and still makes Phi Beta Kappa is a wonderment to us all. And, yes, she is still volunteering at the homeless shelter.'

"I get a couple dozen Christmas letters a year, and I sit and read them in my old bathrobe as I chow down Hostess Twinkies. Everyone in the letters is busy as beavers, piling up honors hand over fist, volunteering up a storm, traveling to Beijing, Abu Dhabi and Antarctica; nobody is in treatment or depressed or flunking out of school, though occasionally there is a child who gets shorter shrift. "Chad is adjusting well to his new school and making friends. He especially enjoys handicrafts." How sad for Chad. The backstory is that he is in reform school learning to get along with other little felons and making belts and birdhouses, but he can't possibly measure up to the goddess Tara....

"This is rough on us whose children are not paragons. Most children aren't. A great many teenage children go through periods when they loath you and go around slamming doors and playing psychotic music and saying things like 'I wish I had never been born,' which is a red-hot needle stuck under your fingernail. One must be very selective, writing about them for the annual newsletter. "Sean is becoming very much his own person and is unafraid to express himself. He is a very lively presence in our family and his love of music is a thing to behold."

"I come from Minnesota where it is considered shameful to be shameless, where modesty is always in fashion, where self-promotion is looked at askance. Give us a gold trophy and we will have it bronzed so you won't think that we think we're special." (CHICAGO TRIBUNE, December 13, 2006)

And I've told my family that I'm not giving presents this year, instead I'm giving everyone my opinion! I'm sure they're thrilled!

Almost 40 years ago, songwriter Mark Lowry scribbled down some lyrics for a Christmas song about Mary, paying homage to the teenage girl who had a baby 2000 years ago in the little town of Bethlehem. His song has become a modern Christmas classic, and it consists of a series of questions.....Greg.....

So my homily will be an attempt to answer Lowry's question. Did Mary know?

No, Mary did not know. She was a young girl, probably mid-teens. She had a boyfriend, and they were engaged. But she and Joseph had never been intimate. They didn't live together (Mt 1:18). They had not known each other in the biblical sense. The Bible is emphatic about this. Twice in our text, Mary is described as a virgin, and once, she throws up an argument against Gabriel, the angelic messenger, saying his proposal is absurd. "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (v. 34)

Of the four gospel writers, leave it to a doctor (Luke) to violate doctor/patient confidentiality protocols and spill the beans. She was a virgin. Matthew adds to the scandal by noting that when Joseph realized that his gal evidently had 'a cheatin' heart,' he was inclined 'to dismiss her quietly' rather than 'expose her to public disgrace.' (Mt 1:19).

But after a conversation with an unspecified 'angel of the Lord,' he up and married her ('he took her as his wife,' Mt 1:24), and then waited for the blessed event covered so dramatically by Dr. Luke's next chapter. Joseph is a good guy, but let's face it, he doesn't get much ink in the New Testament, and when he does, everyone knows he's not really Joseph. He's Mr. Mary.

So this is the Mary of the gospel reading today, who – if we believe Da Vinci's version of the annunciation -- is sitting alfresco in the Florentine courtyard of her palace, nestled in a Tuscan forested background. She is seated at a lectern with the Hebrew Scriptures before her. She greets with an upraised hand the angel Gabriel, who bows toward the maiden, proffering a lily.

Mary and Gabriel have a brief conversation in which the angel lets her in on a shocking and disturbing secret, and now the question can be asked again: "WHAT DID MARY KNOW?"

First, Mary didn't know what was going on. And sometimes, we don't either. I'm a bit direction challenged, and I've stood in a huge mall and looked at the YOU ARE HERE sign, but still don't know where I am. Even if I do know where, thanks to the sign, I still might not be clear where I'm going or how to get there.

This describes Mary as she listens to Gabriel. All she knew was that she was going to have a baby. She didn't know WHY. She certainly didn't know HOW, since, as she told Gabriel, she'd never slept with anyone.

We, too, are often confused as to why we are in our present predicaments. We ask ourselves, "How long am I going to be working at this dead-end job?" Or, "Why am I still in this relationship?" Or, "When am I going to figure out what to do with my life?"

Often, like Mary, we're clueless. The good news is that it's ALRIGHT. God sometimes has this annoying habit of dealing with us on a 'need to know' basis. Sometimes we don't need to know what lies ahead – at least not yet. One of the hard things about being a follower of Christ is, that often, there's a sort of built-in-ambiguity. But it's okay. We live with uncertainty. We live by faith.

Mary may have suspected that uncertainty would be the new normal as she moved ahead from this watershed moment.

Second, Mary didn't know that she was 'favored.' Sometimes we forget this too. A little later in this chapter, in verse 48, in her Magnificat, she reminds us of her favored status: "For He has looked with favor on the lowliness of His servant." The Bible doesn't tell us why, specifically, Mary was chosen for this role from among scores of other possible candidates. Mary did have a heart that was inclined toward God. She was a girl with a remarkable willingness to risk everything, even her life, to comply with the will of God. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be done to me according to your word," she replied. (v. 38)

Yet Mary is NOT favored because of her perfection or unwavering faith, but rather because of the faithfulness of God. She is invited into God's plan, not because of her achievements, status or goodness, but rather because God CHOSE to lift up the lowly (Lk 1:52) In that sense, we are exactly like Mary too.

In this, Mary had the good sense to see the hand of God in what was happening to her. She didn't bemoan her circumstances; she rejoiced in them, knowing that what looked like a scandal and calamity to others, was actually a sign that God was paying attention to her.

Third, Mary didn't know how she was going to suffer. Most parents don't. She didn't know that:

--from this point on, her house would be a mess;

- her Son would be brilliant;
- there would be an endless stream of questions and, even worse, answers;
- things wouldn't always go according to plan;
- the question of which parent Jesus looks like would always be an awkward one.
- she'd make so many mistakes;
- the night before delivery was the last night in a month of Sabbaths that she'd get any sleep;
- the laundry would never end.
- they would become refugees, fleeing King Herod, and immigrants in the land of Egypt

Mary suffered. She didn't know what it would be like raising a gifted and talented boy. Once, when Jesus was 12, they'd gone down to Jerusalem for Passover. They were there with a contingent from Nazareth. When they left to return home, they did so without Jesus, thinking He was with some of His friends and their parents. But He wasn't. Can you imagine her down on her knees praying to God the Almighty Father and saying "Not sure how to tell you this, but your son's been missing for the last couple of days, but don't worry, we're still looking for Him. Any ideas where we should look?" They had contacted the Jerusalem police and filled out a Missing Person Report. An Amber Alert was issued. Nothing. And they find him in the last place anyone would look for an almost teenage boy – in church! And then a kind of mouthy reply when they finally DID find Him: "Didn't you know I had to be in my Father's house?" Luke says His parents just stared at Him: "But they did not understand what He said to them."

Mary suffered, but she also "treasured all these things in her heart." (2:52) Years later, she and her son attended a wedding in Cana (Jn 2). When the wine ran out, she had a rather sharp exchange with her son. They clearly were not on the same page. And less than a thousand days later, she was standing at the site of the crucifixion, and she witnessed what no mother should witness. Yes, Mary suffered.

When we dig into this story a bit, we find that we have an awfully lot in common with Mary. For we too struggle, and we too have questions.

- Can we say that we are servants of God?
- Can we, like Mary, trust in God?
- Do we have cause to praise God?
- Have we experienced His mercy, which 'is for those who fear Him from generation to generation'?
- Why hasn't our life turned out the way we had planned it – and when we had planned it?

All of these and more are worth a lot of pondering. And a lot of them require what was required of Mary -- our fiat -- our yes -- "Let it be done to me, according to your word." Amen. (all of this adapted from Timothy Merrill and Carl Wilton in "MARY DIDN'T KNOW" in HOMILETICS ONLINE, Sunday, December 24, 2023)