

What if you'd known?

Third Sunday of Advent 2017

In the name of the one who names us and claims us and saves us all, amen.

Mary, did you know?

I won't sing it for you, but we hear this song repeatedly this time of year, outlining all the miraculous things that Mary would behold her son doing in the future: he would make us new, he would perform miracles, he would be the lord of all creation. The music gives us a carefully curated version of a life in all its potential perfection; the life that every parent hopes will unfold for his or her child, divine in our eyes.

Mary has been visited by an angel, a frightening vision that tells her that she is destined to bear a child, virgin as she is, and that greatness awaits that child. And in the scriptural accounts, Mary listens to Gabriel, replies that she is the lord's servant and says yes. Ok. Let it be so.

I've often wondered if Mary did know, if she knew what the future held in store, and if so would she still have said yes. Because it wasn't easy, even from the beginning. If you grew up in a Catholic tradition, you may have prayed the seven joys of Mary. We who were non-Catholic may have sung the old English carol, The First Good Joy of Mary. But like yin and yang, there are also the seven sorrows of Mary and again, I wonder if she knew.

Just as an example, while the second joy was the visitation, the second sorrow was the flight into Egypt. In their blog *Steel Magnificat*, Mary and Michael Pezzulo write that perhaps it unfolded like this:

“Imagine her terror. Things were bad enough before. She came to Bethlehem in the worst of circumstances and gave birth, destitute, in the stable. She went to the temple with her baby, longing for consolation, and received a prophecy of more suffering. Now, her husband wakes her in the middle of the night. He tells her the angel— that beautiful messenger who announced the baby's coming and told him not to be afraid— that angel has returned. But this time, the news is not good. This time, the angel didn't tell him not to be afraid. The angel told him that someone is coming to kill the baby. They have to run away, and they can't run back home to Nazareth. They have to leave the country. They have to leave now. Mary picks up the baby and runs. They run from Bethlehem into the dark, down roads they don't know, through unfamiliar countryside. They travel all night, quiet as they can, not knowing where the danger is but knowing it's always close. Her heart shoots in terror whenever the baby cries. She is exhausted, but she dares not stop to rest. They run until dawn, then hide for a short time, then run again. They run for days and days. They flee over four hundred miles. They fly to the border. They fly into the arms of their nation's old enemy to hide. Lord only knows what they find there, in a country whose culture was completely foreign, whose religion they don't share, whose language they don't speak. There's no reason to believe anyone was kind to them. Few are ever kind to refugees, at any time

in history. They sojourned there for three years. They hid, away from friends, away from family, away from other people of their faith and everyone they knew, for three years. There is no reason to believe it ever became easy.”

Mary, did you know?

If we knew what lay ahead, would most of us have made the choices we have made, have taken the risks that we all have? If we were faced with a prophecy, if we each had our own angel Gabriel, our own John the Baptist would we listen? Because as Mary saw (did she already know?) it's not always a bright future that we careen so recklessly toward. And some of us deal with that uncertainty, that sorrow and that loss differently than others. Not better or worse, just differently. This time of year can bring that reality into laser-sharp focus.

Roger Owens teaches spirituality and ministry at Pittsburgh Theological Seminary. Two weeks ago, the first Sunday of advent, he arrived at church with a couple of his kids early; he wanted to be sure he didn't miss one of his favorite hymns, Come Thou Long Expected Jesus. He made it through the first two lines before sorrow overwhelmed him. He said, “The sanctuary looked gorgeous- a floor to ceiling Christmas tree, a simple advent wreath, a choir twice its usual size. But I couldn't meditate on the hope of advent- that the Christ who came, the Christ of Mary and the manger and the wise men, would return in glory to finish the liberation, to make all things new. I was too overcome with the other side of that truth: we are not yet free- I am not yet free; I'm not released from my fears. And there's no reason to think that I will be any time soon.”

He remembered sitting home, trying to write and doing pretty well. And then he heard deep in himself “You are a worthless nobody. You thought you would be somebody by now, amount to something, but look at you sitting alone in the middle of the day... pretending you are a writer. And look how you try to wake early in the morning to pray, pretending you are a Christian. Hah!” The shadow side of advent, he calls it. The seven sorrows that balance Mary's seven joys.

But he says that advent gives us “the space to examine the truth of our lives and to weep for the many ways we are still unfree, haunted by our fears, real and imagined, individually and corporately.” He believes that while the overwhelming theme of advent is hope, that all manner of things will be well, we also need to acknowledge that it may not be well tomorrow, or the day after that. Or possibly not for the foreseeable future.

The truth is that Mary's life unfolded just as the prophet said it would. She said yes and indeed, a virgin bore a son and named him Jesus. He was great and was called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God gave him the throne of his father David and he reigns over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom has no end. But Mary also said yes to darkness, days of doubt and worry, suffering and heartbreak.

Mary did you know?

For many of us, the future did not unfold the way we may have thought it would. We may have been visited by prophets and believed them. We met prophets who assured us of the happily ever after and we believed them, We said “yes, Ok, let it be so” to that future and instead felt betrayed

by a future that could include illness, loss, abuse or depression. A future that could include Sandy Hook. For many of us, advent points out the sharp contrast between the divine and our lives. For many of us, our brokenness and our loss is overwhelming. We need silence, we need comfort, we need to be reminded that we are not alone in that dark place.

For some of us, we will find that silence, that comfort, that reminder here tonight at 7 o'clock at the Blue Christmas service, the Longest Night. In the midst of the expectation and the hope of advent, we will offer respite. We will be with each other. We will sit. We will listen. We will pass a tissue. We will offer a hug. We will be ok with uncomfortable silence. And we will remind each other that we are strong.

Together we will find the courage to live into the future that unfolds for each of us and to uncover the deep faith that it can take to say yes. Even when we know.

Amen.