

Favorite Christmas Songs: Mary, Did You Know?

Luke 1:26-38

John Breon

In a survey some weeks ago, I asked you to name your favorite Christmas songs. More than forty songs were mentioned in responses. In this series, we'll count down the five that got the most votes.

Number 5 is the newest song on our list: *Mary, Did You Know?*

Mark Lowry wrote the lyrics and Buddy Greene composed the music. In 1984, Mark Lowry wrote a program for the Christmas pageant at his church. In the script he included questions for Mary as she held her baby. Mark's mother kind of prompted him to think along these lines. She had said to him, "If anyone on earth knew for sure that Jesus was virgin born—Mary knew!"

Imagining Mary at the cross and then looking back to the manger, Mark thought about the power and majesty Mary cradled in her arms. His tiny lips had spoken worlds into existence. The one she gave birth to was the one who had given her life. Mark was following a long line of thinking about the incarnation of God the Son. Jesus was the embodiment of God, God-with-us as one of us.

St. Augustine said it this way:

He lay in a manger and yet the world rested in his hands. As an infant, He was wordless and yet He was the Word Itself. Him whom the Heavens couldn't huddle, the lap of a single woman could easily cuddle. She was toting about on her hip Him Who carries her about the universe. (*Sermons to the People*, translated by William Griffin, 60)

In another sermon, he said:

He so loved us that for our sakes He, through whom time was made, was made in time; and He, older by eternity than the world itself, was younger in age than many of His servants in the world; He became what He used to create, a human being; He was given existence by a

mother whom He brought into existence; He was carried in hands which He formed; He nursed at breasts which He filled; He cried like a babe in the manger in speechless infancy—this Word without which human eloquence is speechless! (*20 Centuries of Great Preaching* 1:137 and Griffin, 82)

Mark Lowry started writing questions he'd like to ask Mary, things like, "Mary, do you know who is in your arms?" "Did you know the one who holds creation together, and the one who holds you together is lying helpless in the manger?" "Did you know that your baby boy will walk on water, give sight to the blind, and calm a storm at sea?"

Questions like that were part of the Christmas pageant script Mark wrote. Seven years later, in 1991, he gave those words to his friend, musician Buddy Greene. Greene says he held onto those lyrics for a couple of weeks. Then he got them out and looked at them again. To him, they suggested music in a minor key. He started writing and completed the music in about thirty minutes. He called Mark and sang the song to him over the phone. Mark was excited and said, "That's it!"

Two weeks later, they recorded a demo of the song on a small portable machine. From there, many artists have recorded it and made it one of the most popular Christmas songs of our time. (Several online articles tell the story of the song's origin. This one comes mostly from <http://staugustine.com/living/religion/2014-11-28/story-behind-song-mary-did-you-know>)

Online you'll find some criticism of the song. People can get really picky. Some of our Roman Catholic friends object that the song says that Mary needed to be delivered and made new. They don't believe that Mary needed to be delivered because there's Roman Catholic doctrine that says Mary was born without sin. That's what "immaculate conception" refers to. It's the idea that God enabled Mary to be born without the infection of original sin.

Of course Mary is unique. She plays a special role in the drama of salvation. But it seems best to see Mary as an ordinary person who

becomes a model of discipleship through hearing God's call and saying yes to it.

Some other people criticize the song saying, "Yes, Mary did know. The angel told her." There's some truth in that. But let's allow a little poetic license. Even if Mary did know, we look on in awe. Someone talking to Mary might wonder what she knew when. I think that's what Mark Lowry was getting at—we might be curious and ask Mary about the things she knew. And, it might be that by asking these things the song is affirming what Mary did know—certainly what she came to know after Jesus' death and resurrection and the Holy Spirit's coming at Pentecost. Really, the song is more about Jesus than Mary. Through the series of questions it asks, it affirms these things about Jesus.

The angel announcing Jesus' birth tells Mary some of these things. Our best guess is that Mary was in her early teens when the angel Gabriel visits her and delivers the news that she is highly favored and that the Lord is with her. She's troubled and wonders about this, so the angel continues, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end."

That's a lot to take in and Mary's still struggling to understand how she will even have a baby. She and Joseph are betrothed, pledged to be married. In Jewish custom of the time, a betrothed couple were considered married in some sense. If one of them would die during that year, the other would be seen as widowed. Divorce was required to break a betrothal. But they didn't live together yet and their culture and faith had a strong emphasis on sexual purity. Mary and Joseph hadn't yet been together sexually and she knew she hadn't been with another man, so she naturally wondered how she would conceive and give birth at all, much less to the Messiah.

The angel said that the power of the Holy Spirit would cause her to conceive and give birth to the holy one, the Son of God. Her relative Elizabeth was old and past the time of being about to have children, but

she was in the sixth month of her pregnancy. Elizabeth's pregnancy came about in a different way than Mary's, but it was still an example of God's power and that "no word from God will ever fail."

Mary chooses to believe and to trust God. "I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled."

She quickly leaves to visit Elizabeth. The two expectant mothers, one very old and one very young, greet each other. Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit and announces that Mary is blessed because she was chosen to be the Lord's mother and because she believed.

Then Mary prophesies. She's also filled with the Holy Spirit in some sense. She's full of God's presence. She echoes the song of Hannah (1 Samuel 2:1-10). She magnifies the Lord, glorifies God, shows God's greatness. She rejoices in God her Savior who was mindful of her humble state. She knows she's blessed because the Mighty One has done great things for her. She proclaims the holiness of God's name. She announces God's mercy and mighty deeds.

A lot was revealed to Mary. Later, we see her pondering in her heart the events around Jesus' birth. She wonders. She doesn't always get what Jesus is doing or saying. At one point she seems to misunderstand him. But then she's at the cross when he dies. And she's with the other disciples after his resurrection and ascension.

Because of God's grace and through Mary's response to God's gracious call, the Savior was born. *Mary, Did You Know?* mentions several things Jesus did and some of the ways Jesus is identified. Let's look at the song and see what it tells us about Mary's child Jesus.

"Mary did you know that your baby boy will one day walk on water?" The Gospels of Matthew (14:22-33), Mark (6:45-52), and John (6:16-21) all tell about Jesus walking on the Sea of Galilee to where his disciples are in a boat struggling against a storm.

"...will save our sons and daughters"—the name Jesus is the Greek form of the Hebrew Joshua. It means the Lord saves or is salvation. Jesus came to save his people from their sins (Mt 1:21).

"...has come to make you new"—"Therefore, if anyone is in Christ the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!" (2 Corinthians 5:17).

"This child that you've delivered will soon deliver you." This is a play on the word "deliver." Mary delivered Jesus, gave birth to him. But Jesus the Savior is the one who delivers people from sin and death.

"Mary, did you know that your baby boy will give sight to a blind man?" The Gospels record Jesus healing several blind people. Mark has a section of his Gospel that begins with the healing of a blind man who needs a second touch from Jesus to see clearly. That section ends with Jesus healing a blind beggar who then follows Jesus on the way (8:22-26; 10:46-52). These healings not only show Jesus' compassion and power, but they're also a picture of discipleship.

"will calm a storm with his hand"—At least twice, Jesus calms a storm at sea. This makes the disciples wonder who he is. The one they thought was just their teacher is doing things God does.

"has walked where angels trod"—God the Son existed in glory as one Person of the Trinity from eternity. He left that glory to become one of us, to make himself known and to restore and redeem human life. The apostle Paul tells how Jesus was in the form of God but "did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather he emptied himself by taking the form of a servant, being made in human likeness" (Philippians 2:5-7).

"And when you kiss your little baby you've kissed the face of God"—Jesus is truly the Word who was with God, who was God, and who was made flesh/became human (John 1:1, 14). Of course there's mystery in the incarnation of God the Son. Jesus is God-with-us (Mt 1:23), but God the Father remains in heaven and the Holy Spirit continues to be active in many ways. Still, the Trinity is present and active in Jesus who is the incarnate Son.

"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." The prophet Isaiah had said that God would restore his people, transform the desert, and bring healing in these ways (35). Much later, when John the Baptist was in prison, he sent word to Jesus: "Are you the one we seek or should we

look for someone else?" Jesus' reply echoes Isaiah's description of God's kingdom. Jesus apparently fulfills those words. He tells John's friends, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me" (Mt 11:2-6).

"Mary, did you know that your baby boy is Lord of all creation?" Jesus embodies God the creator. Paul writes:

The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: ...all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. (Colossians 1:15-17)

"will one day rule the nations"—Revelation tells us that the kingdoms of the world have become the kingdom of our Lord and of his Messiah and he will reign for ever and ever (11:15).

"is heaven's perfect Lamb"—John the Baptist introduced Jesus as "the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world" (John 1:29). Jesus fulfills the Passover and what the Old Testament sacrifices pointed toward. He brings deliverance from sin and death. He provides forgiveness. He makes it possible for us to be in God's presence.

"This sleeping child you're holding is the Great I Am." At the burning bush, when Moses asked God's name, the LORD said, "I Am Who I Am" (Exodus 3:14). By the time of Jesus, many centuries later, Jews would hardly speak God's name for fear of dishonoring it. But Jesus freely spoke about the Father and identified with him. In John's Gospel, there are seven major sayings of Jesus where he says, "I am...." At the end of John 8, Jesus concludes an argument with a crowd by saying, "Very truly I tell you, before Abraham was born, I am!" (v. 58).

I came across two different ways to apply what this song tells us. One says that regardless of what Mary knew when Jesus was a baby, we now know about Jesus. We can read the Gospels. We can know all these things he did. We can know he's the Savior.

But do we act like we know? Mary didn't fully understand what the future held or how her innocent Son would die for sinful people, but we can look back and read about it. The trouble is, sometimes we forget. We forget how He calmed a fierce storm with His words and, instead, we think He can't handle our problems. We forget He created the world...and, instead, try to drown Him out. We forget He delivered us by grace and, instead, let guilt and feelings of inadequacy overwhelm us. We do know who Jesus is. But do our actions show it? (<https://billygraham.org/story/more-to-the-music-mary-did-you-know>)

The other idea I read says that we have no way of knowing what Mary knew. Probably, she knew just enough to get started. It's likely that "the work of bearing God into the world involved ceaseless discover and ongoing consent, just as it does today. My guess is that each trembling 'yes' Mary whispered into God's heart changed the world," as our yeses to God change the world (Debie Thomas, *The Pause Before Yes*, <https://www.journeywithjesus.net/Essays/20141215JJ.shtml>)

As you listen to *Mary, Did You Know?*, can you turn it into a prayer? Let it help you see Jesus for who he is. Know that he calls and invites you to receive him, to trust him, to walk with him. Say yes to him.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=agQvboUi3mQ>