

“Christmas and Joy Go Together”

Luke 1: 26-38

Preached by Dr. Robert F. Browning, Pastor
Smoke Rise Baptist Church
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Did you know the gender of your child before he or she was born? If your children were born in the last fifteen or twenty years, you probably did. At least you were given the choice of knowing.

It goes without saying that in Biblical times there was no way for a couple to know the gender of their child before birth. Certainly, the Bethlehem Birthing Clinic did not have this technology. And yet, Mary knew that the baby she was carrying was going to be a boy.

This was not all that Mary knew. Luke tells us that she knew several other things. She knew what name she was to give her son after he was born, Jesus. She knew that he would be great because he would become a king and his kingdom would never end. In addition, she knew that the Lord had chosen her to carry and birth this baby because He had a lot of confidence in her. That's a lot to know, especially in such a primitive and humble setting.

At the same time, there were some things she did not know. She was confused about how this was going to happen since she was not married. She did not know how her family would react when they heard the news. She did not know how she would take care of this baby if Joseph, her fiancé, rejected and abandoned her. This list of unknowns seemed to be more challenging and frightening than the list of certainties.

Isn't this a paradigm of life? It seems life is a combination of two lists, what we know and what we don't know.

This is not necessarily the way we want it because we want answers and feel very uncomfortable when questions don't have them. And yet, there has never been a time in my life and yours when all our questions had answers. That day will not ever come, either, at least in this world.

So, what do you do? How do you live with certainty and uncertainty? Let me make some suggestions using Mary as an example.

First of all, what do you do with what you know? You accept it, the good and bad. You don't ignore or deny reality. You acknowledge and confront it.

I have a counselor friend who coined the phrase, "*Camera Check.*" "What you see before the lens is what will be captured on film," he says. "So, take a picture of your situation, the good, bad and ugly, and look at it like you would look at a picture. See what is there, even the things you don't want in your picture. Denying them will only make a bad situation worse."

Then, refuse to let what you know control you, especially the difficult or painful. Refuse to let the uncomfortable or unpleasant things of life paralyze or depress you. Don't let them overshadow the good to the point that you don't even see your blessings. Problems have that kind of power, you know. Don't let them cover your eyes with spiritual cataracts.

I recall hearing a testimony by a handicap person who said, "Events may color my life, but I shall choose the colors!" I like that!

From all indications, Mary accepted the news of the angel concerning her pregnancy. She neither ignored it nor rebelled against it. She accepted this challenge, hardships and all. I think I understand why the Lord had so much confidence in her.

What do you do with what you don't know? What did Mary do? She gave her questions and future to God.

After being informed that she was going to have a baby, Mary asked, "How will this be since I am a virgin? The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come upon you and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. For even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to

be barren is in her sixth month. For nothing is impossible with God.” Then Mary responded, “I am the Lord’s servant. May it be to me as you have said” Luke 1:34-38.

I don’t know if I have ever read a more powerful affirmation of faith. What Mary did was to end this dialogue filled with uncertainties by returning to what she knew. She did not dwell on the unknown, which would have paralyzed her. Instead, she focused upon something that she knew that made all the difference in the world in her situation. She knew that she was “the Lord’s servant.”

She knew that she loved and trusted God and evidently He felt the same way about her. She knew that she had not been irresponsible but that God had a purpose for this event and the power to fulfill that purpose. While this challenge overwhelmed her, it did not Him. It was bigger than she was but not bigger than He was. So, she gave God her life and future, questions and all, and trusted Him to be faithful.

How many of us can identify with Mary today? All of us. We know what it is like to live with certainty and uncertainty. We know what it is like to be happy and scared, don’t we? We know what it is like to be excited and overwhelmed.

I also hope we know what it is like to trust God to help us live with our questions and fears, for this is the secret to living victoriously. It is the secret to finding joy in life, too, for genuine joy is the result of faithful obedience to a God that is good and faithful.

Dr. John Claypool is the Visiting Professor of Preaching at the McAfee School of Theology on Mercer’s Atlanta campus. He is in great demand to speak at conferences and seminars and I understand why. He is one of the best speakers I have ever heard. His gentle, soft-spoken, thought-provoking style of delivery mesmerizes his audience. People hang on to every word.

He is known for his “confessional” style of preaching. He often shares with his listeners events from his own pilgrimage and his feelings about those incidents. He is willing to be transparent and vulnerable for the sake of his audience, characteristics very rare in public speakers.

I shall never forget the time I heard Dr. Claypool talk about the pain he has endured from traumatic events in his life, the death of his nine-year-old daughter who died with leukemia, his divorce and subsequent exit from the pastorate of a Baptist church. He reached a point in his life when he had depleted all his resources and said, “If there is anything more, it is up to God.”

Dr. Claypool would be the first to tell you there has been more, a lot more. God was not finished with him and opened doors of opportunity and brought people into his life so that he could continue ministering. I would be willing to say that Dr. Claypool has encouraged more people through his books, sermons, lectures and counsel in the last twenty years than the previous twenty. I know I am one.

This is what it means to give your questions and future to God. As Solomon wrote in Proverbs 3:5-6, “Trust in the Lord with all your heart. Lean not unto your own understanding. In all your ways acknowledge Him and He will direct your path.” Ask Mary or Joseph or John Claypool if you need reassurance.