



God Who Knows My Name

TEXT
Luke 1:39–56

December 11, 2016 — Sermon by Rev. Tom Are, Jr.

Mary sang. She sang because grace had changed her. She sang because love had found her.

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.

When grace comes, it comes with a name attached.

Several years ago, we got a telescope for our kids for Christmas. It turns out that was one of those gifts that proved to be more for me than the kids. They don't use it very much, but I love looking through it on clear nights. You can see Saturn and her rings. You can see Jupiter and her moons. You can see stars, so many stars. It made me wonder just how many stars there might be. Do you know?

Well, we begin by knowing about the galaxies. The closest galaxy to us is the Andromeda Galaxy. It is 2.3 million light years away. (A light year is the distance light can travel in a year. Light moves fast enough that it can circle the earth 7.5 times in one second.¹ So in a year, it can travel a long way!"²) The most distant galaxies are 13.5 billion light years away. The smallest galaxies include 100 billion stars.

Larger galaxies might include as many as a trillion stars to maybe 10 trillion stars.

So how many galaxies are there? Some say there are between 100 billion to 200 billion galaxies that constitute the universe. Astrophysicists now estimate there may be as many as 300 sextillion stars ... that's a 3 with 23 zeros after it.³ That's a lot of stars.

If you ever look at the night sky and realize how useless it is to count the stars, you might wonder, as I have, how does God ever find us down here?

Most scholars suggest that Mary would not have to comprehend the mysteries of the universe to feel small. Life itself made her feel small. We romanticize her story, but had the angel Gabriel not called her name, she may have gone through her whole life invisible. Scholars point out that she was poor. As an unmarried woman, she was lacking status. She was engaged to Joseph — part of an arranged marriage, no doubt.

Compare her to the others in the story. Zechariah was of the house of Abijah. Elizabeth was a descendant of Aaron (you remember Moses' brother). The scripture says that both of them were righteous before God; they

obeyed all of the commandments. And when the angel finds Zechariah to tell him that Elizabeth, old in years, would have a son named John, well, Zechariah was in the temple, doing his religious duty.

I tell you this because it is a sharp contrast with Mary. We must assume that Mary came from some family line, but we are not told anything about them. We don't know if Mary was righteous or faithful to the commands. We are only told that she is a young, unmarried impoverished girl. In her world, she was all but unnoticed. She was a nobody.

But all that changes when the Angel of God calls her by name: "Mary, don't be afraid. The Lord has found favor with you." So she sings.

In Wendell Berry's fantastic novel *Jayber Crow*, a little boy named Jonah Crow ends up going to what used to be called an orphanage. He went to the orphanage of the Good Shepherd. It was run by religious folks who found children to be a nuisance. In his first moments at the Good Shepherd, Jonah met Brother Whitespade, who said, "Jonah ... I will call you J. Crow."

He says, "I thought at first that Brother Whitespade, by

changing my name to J., had made me a special case. But I soon found out that all of us orphans ... were known by the initial letters of our first names along with our last names. ... We were thus not quite nameless, but also not quite named. The effect was curious. For a while anyhow, and for how long a while it would be hard to say, we all acted on the assumption that we were no longer the persons we had been — which for all practical purposes was the correct assumption. We became in some way faceless to ourselves and to one another.”⁴

There is a certain human need to be known, to be called by name. It declares that we belong, that we matter.

When I came here, I asked that we create these name tags. There were a lot of you, and I knew I didn't have a chance of learning names if we didn't have name tags. Not everyone loved them. After all, we are Village; we can't all wear the same accessories. So we compromised and made them small enough that only those of eagle eye sight can actually read the names.

One Sunday my dear friend Jadeen ... I miss her ... met me in the narthex. She covered up her nametag and said to me, “Do you know my name?”⁵ Oh my, those who call you out like that, they still go to heaven, but they are the least in the kingdom of heaven.

I started to say, “Everybody knows you, Fred,” but I didn't. I said, “Yes, you are my friend, Jadeen.” She said, “Well, that's a relief. If I'm going to wear this thing, I want to make sure it

works. I want you to know my name.” I get that.

There is a basic human need to be known — not famous, that's something else altogether. But we need to be known.

It was almost ten years ago now, Kansas City made national news. We made the news because we learned the name of a little girl: Her name was Erica Green. For almost seven years, there had been vigils for a little 3-year-old child who had been murdered and cast aside. And no one knew her name.

So for seven years, there were vigils for “Precious Doe,” as she was called. It was a way of insisting that one whose name was not known must have a name. Every person has a name. To call her Precious Doe was both a statement that we didn't know who she was, and also a statement that children should be known. It was a statement that we want to live in a city where we know the names of our children. To speak the name is to speak one's humanity. But sometimes the world forgets our names, forgets that we are. Her name was Erica Green.

And if I understand this text, while the world forgot her name or kept it secret, God always knew she was Erica Green.

I watch the children streaming out of Syria, and I wonder, as the bombs fall: Do you not see that they are children? They have names. Do we remember that God knows their names?

I watched Walter Scott being shot not too far from where I was ordained in Charleston, South Carolina, running from

the police, unarmed, with a broken taillight. He was shot in the back, and the jury can't convict. I wonder if some on the jury forgot that his name is Walter Scott. God knows his name.

The first grace of Christmas is the promise that God knows your name.

Mary was one of those people that the world passed by. So no wonder when the Angel calls her name, “Do not be afraid, Mary,” Mary sang. She sang because grace had changed her. She sang because love had found her.

My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with favor on me. God knows me.

When grace comes, it comes with a name attached. There may be 300 sextillion stars, but God has found you. Love has come, can't stay away. It's more than enough reason to sing.

Bill was my friend from a former congregation. His son Billy said he was in the Battle of the Bulge, but Bill would never talk about that.

Bill and Evelyn were married shortly after the war. They were high school sweethearts. They wrote each other all through the war. When he came back, they were married in the church and had a reception in the same fellowship hall they had used for Youth Fellowship every Sunday night they were in high school. Bill worked at a paint store. They raised three children.

By the time I met them, they lived in a Presbyterian home — he in assisted living, she in memory care. I went to visit him on occasion. I always found him

sitting in her room. He would tell her stories about a life she could no longer remember, about children she no longer recognized, about a husband who had loved her from across the ocean and back.

I knew the truth: If he never came, she would not miss him. I stopped in one day. He was reading, and she was resting. My arrival awakened her. I introduced myself again. She said, "Nice to meet you." Then, pointing to Bill, she said, "Have you met this nice man?"

"Yes, I have," I said.

Later he followed me into the hall. I said, "Bill, she doesn't remember you."

"I understand, but that's not why I come. I come because I remember her. I just can't stay away."

I think God is like that. The promise of Christmas is that God knows your name. There are 300 sextillion stars, but God found Mary, and God has found you.

Mary sang. She sang because grace had changed her. She sang because love had found her.

*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.*

When grace comes, it comes with a name attached. And since it is often your name, we should all sing.

¹Earthsky.org, "How Far Is a Light Year?"

²Traveling at 186,000 per second, light travels 5.88 trillion miles in a year.

³These numbers are all estimates, and estimates can vary widely. I have taken these numbers from Huffingtonpost.com, "Number of Stars in the Universe Could Be 300 Sextillion: Triple the Amount Scientist Previously Thought."

⁴Wendell Berry, *Jayber Crow* (2000), p. 31

⁵I am grateful to Mark Rivard for granting me permission to share this story today. I shared it the first time during Jadeen's memorial service. She is missed dearly by many in this congregation and beyond.

This sermon was delivered at Village Presbyterian Church, 6641 Mission Road, Prairie Village, KS 66208.

The sermon can be read, heard or seen on the church's website: <http://www.villagepres.org/current-sermonsermon-archives.html>.