

# **Incarnational Knowing**

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**KOINONIA**

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**Incarnational Knowing**  
**By Rev. Emily Joye McGaughy**  
**Koinonia FCCBC**  
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Who are you? And how do you know?

In our text for this morning Mary is forced, by the spiritual and material dimensions of her life, to consider who she is. Young, poor, single, pregnant and living in a time when none of those things brought you into glowing social standing—Mary was forced into some major decision making. But before all of that, she was forced to ask questions like: Who am I? Why me? What am I going to do? Ever been in a moment like that in your life? When you were forced because of circumstance to rethink yourself, to ask in no uncertain terms: Who am I? Why me? What am I going to do?

Originally written in French in 1637 in his famous “Discourse on Method,” Renee Descartes, the father of Western philosophy proclaimed I think therefore I am. Eventually translated into Latin, Cogito Ergo Sum, Descartes’ theory galvanized the enlightenment which to this day underlies many of our efforts as a society to do science, to engage politically, to teach children and to think critically. The main tenet of Descartes’ famous phrase “I think therefore I am,” the main tenet of enlightenment philosophy is that thinking is fundamental to existence, that identity is linked to the mind. Descartes and his philosophical camp were products of the seventeenth century, just like Sassoferato and his old-school depiction of Mary. So much of what we inherit in Christian symbolism, Christian theology and Christian liturgy comes from this era. An era that bends heavily towards what’s white, “right,” and disembodied. An era that places the individual over the relational, male over female, written

word over spoken word, logic over creativity, mind over body and head over heart.

Products of Descartes & Sassoferato's era would say that in questioning moments like Mary's in the first chapter of Luke, questioning moments when it's all up in the air: all you've got to do is think your way forward. Think about who you are. Think about why this happening to you. Think about what you're going to do. Think think think. But Descartes is not God and his emphasis on individual man/mind power is nowhere near biblical. There is a huge problem with the way the enlightenment has infiltrated Christianity. Because of this focus on individualism and rationality in our culture, many of us have been conditioned to think think think (by ourselves in a corner somewhere) when faced with conditions that force us into questioning moments.

But our story from this morning provides us with a different approach to questions of identity and knowing all together and it's no coincidence that women and children are the major players of this text. So a quick recap...

Act One: The Encounter with Gabriel...

Mary is visited by a stranger, like a non-human extra-terrestrial celestial kind of stranger, and she's told some news that flips her script entirely. The text says that though she ultimately spiritually surrendered to God's will, at first she was perplexed and when given the opportunity questioned the whole thing outright.

Act Two: The Encounter with Elizabeth...

After hearing the staggering news of her pregnancy, Mary sets out "with haste" to Elizabeth's house. There she is seen and held and affirmed in the context of a relationship that is familiar, seen and held and affirmed in a relationship that has been ongoing for a long time, a relationship that is reliable because of the on-going intimacy between them, because they've shared time and space and stories,

heartbreaks, hopes and fears and joy and love between them for a long time. It is only in the context of this relationship that Mary is moved to realize what is really happening to her. It is only in the context of Elizabeth's loving gaze, loving words, and loving support that Mary recognizes that she is about to give birth to a miracle that will save the world.

One of the things I love most about this story is its realistic movement from doubt to faith. Much like Mary, many of us experience flip-the-script kind of news with disbelief and questions. If we are people that have committed some major errors in our lives or experienced a lot of heartbreak or we come from marginalized communities or just have low self esteem, we're probably overly quick to interpret new, surprising things with fear, with dread, with interpretation that says "this can't be good." Left to our own 'think think thinking,' many of us would probably talk ourselves out of a miracle, out of birthing new possibilities, out of the very salvation offered by God in our midst just because it didn't fit our pre-conceived notions of what we deserve, or what's to be expected. Mary initially had doubt and questions. But she didn't stay there. She didn't stay in the confines of her thoughts.

The Enlightenment got it wrong. We don't figure out who we are or what to do by thinking alone in a corner somewhere. We faithfully figure out who we are and what to do when those who have loved us for a long time hold us in ways that move us to recognition. It's not "I think therefore I am." It's much more like the South African concept of Ubuntu: "I am because we are."

Mary allowed herself, in the midst of her questions and doubts, to be moved into the comforting relational context of a sisterhood that could help her make sense, help her see clearly, help her act faithfully. In questioning moments we need friendship, partnership, collegiality, long-lasting relationships that are reliable and steadfast, relationships

that have seen us in the best of times and the worst of times, relationships that have a history and glowing track record of fidelity. Relationships that hold up a mirror and show us our self worth, relationships that hear us into speaking our own truth out-loud, relationships that move us to recognize God's presence in our midst.

Who are you? How do you know?

Loving relationships are THE context for discerning revelation. Says in verse 44 that John the Baptist, still in-utero, leaped for joy in Elizabeth's womb upon hearing Mary's voice. When my mom talks to me through skype on Sunday nights, or when Tom Ott preaches at 10 a.m. or when Tom Ryberg plays music during our prayer time at 3:30 each day or when my beloved first comes through the front door at night, my baby moves around like crazy. Our bodies know through relationship. And relationship should be the first thing we engage when discerning who we are or what to do. So on this the fourth Sunday in Advent, think about those who can share your joy, those who pronounce blessings when you come to visit. Think about those whose bodies and words and ways of holding you make it possible for the God in your life to be recognized and delivered. But don't just think about them.

Go where they are. Drive to the city and have dinner if it's been a while. Find a couch to sit on with a cup of coffee together if that's how you roll. Take a walk in the woods. Go for a road trip and sing at the top of your lungs together. Revel in each other's expressions and gestures, the long-standing inside jokes that still make you burst with laughter. Hold quiet time because you're secure enough in each other to do that. Share your truths. Touch each other with kindness. Bless each other without hesitation. It's there. There with your ace, your bestie, your stronghold, the Ethel to your Lucy, the Piglet to your Whinnie-the-Pooh, the Elizabeth to your Mary, the unconditional regard that holds you in all your disbelief, questions and barely

surfacing hopes. It's there, there in that love that you'll know who you are and know that you know. Go there with haste and let your souls magnify the Lord together.

Amen.



