

'O lord you have searched me and known me'
Psalm 139



How did I get to be here, standing in the middle of the Courtyard of the Women in the Temple of Jerusalem watching my son go with Joseph towards the Beautiful Gate. How did I, Mary, from Nazareth in Galilee, daughter of Anne and Joachim, simple faithful people of the land of Israel, find myself giving birth to and raising the Son of Yahweh?

The Lord says 'I have searched you out and known you'.

I thought that my story began the night an angel came to my room and told me that Yahweh had chosen me to be the mother of his son. What could I say to him? If Yahweh calls, like the Prophet Samuel you say 'Speak Lord, your servant is listening.' This is what we are taught. Do not question, just answer. I didn't know then the story of my birth, of the years of struggle and shame my parents had, before my mother gave birth to me, the child of many prayers.

The Lord says 'I know when you sit and when you rise; I perceive your thoughts from afar.'

Once the angel had gone, I had questions. Questions I should have asked. Questions I could not ask. How could I tell my parents? How could I tell Joseph? Should I lie with Joseph, is that how it was going to work? Mother

said I became quiet and secretive. She kept asking whether I was alright. Then she stopped asking questions and said it must be that I was worried about the marriage, so she set about teaching me all that a wife should know. That was so embarrassing!

The Lord smiled down on Mary 'I discern your going out and your lying down; I am familiar with all your ways. Before a word is on your tongue, I know it completely.'

I knew that I was pregnant. I felt different. My body began to change and I began to feel like a mother. I would see other women with babies and imagine myself holding my own. I could hear a baby cry and feel a lurch in my stomach and an urge to go and soothe it. I wanted to learn how to change a baby, to clothe it and clean it. I wanted to know about giving birth, but I could not tell my parents and I could not tell Joseph. I didn't have the right words to say.

The Lord says 'I hem you in behind and before, and lay my hand upon you. Such knowledge is enough for you to do all those things I have asked of you.'

Then Joseph came to me. He asked me directly whether I was with child. I was out in the fields tending the crops. There was no one nearby, but as I stood up I put my hand on my stomach and gently rubbed, that age old gesture of the pregnant woman soothing and protecting. Joseph turned and walked away. He didn't need any words from me. My day of reckoning had arrived. I walked slowly home wondering how I was going to explain things to my mother and father.

They were furious. Joseph had been to see them and had told them that he wished to break off the engagement quietly. They seemed grateful that he was not going to have me stoned to death, although I had never heard of anyone actually being stoned to death for being a whore. I was now a whore. I was pregnant and not by the man I was going to marry. So who was the baby's father? I thought of telling them I didn't know, but thought that would sound worse than the truth. They didn't believe the truth. I didn't blame them. They decided to send me to my mother's cousin Elizabeth. I think that they thought it would be a punishment for me to be away from them, but actually I was glad to escape from their hurt looks. I wondered whether this was in Yahweh's plan, or whether I should fight to remain here and fight for Joseph? Yahweh gave me no answers, so I went.

The Lord rocked Mary in his arms and gently said 'Where can you go from my Spirit? Where can you flee from my presence? If you come up to the heavens, I am here; if you make your bed in the depths, I am there. If you

rise on the wings of the dawn, if you settle on the far side of the sea, even there my hand will guide you, my right hand will hold you fast.'

The trip to Elizabeth was the right thing to do. She was expecting a baby as well, and she seemed to know not just about my pregnancy, but that the child I was carrying was Yahweh's child. She told me her own child was blessed by Yahweh. So, for the first time, I had someone who could understand me, who could answer some of my questions. I stayed there until after her own child was born, a boy they named John. I saw the miracle of birth, and I learned at her knee how to care for a child blessed by Yahweh.

It seemed as if my time away gave Yahweh time to work on Joseph, for it was he who came to fetch me, and he who asked Zachariah, Elizabeth's husband, and the village Rabbi, to perform the wedding. It was not how a wedding should be, a glorious celebration by the community of two of their people coming together. Our wedding was two people coming together before Yahweh, to complete his purpose and his works. There was no great feasting and drinking. There was no bawdy behaviour and laughter. It was a promise to each other before Yahweh

It looked as if Yahweh had worked things out for us. I could return home with Joseph and slip into our life together. I hoped that Yahweh had in his plan for the Emperor to suddenly demand a census, which meant that Joseph and I had to walk to his family town of Bethlehem to be counted, when I was only days away from giving birth. Yes, I know that he did, because scriptures say that the Promised of Yahweh will come from Bethlehem. How else was he going to get us there!

Giving birth in a stable, surrounded by animals with the help of an unknown midwife, and my mother far away, would not have been what I planned for myself or for my son. For Yahweh it seemed to give him full rein to celebrate. Shepherds from the fields came claiming to have heard and seen a heavenly host singing and telling them the good news. Anna and Simeon here in the Temple all those years ago when we brought Jesus to present him to Yahweh. They told us that they had been waiting a lifetime to see the Promised of Yahweh. All seemed light and bright and the future, well, the future seemed to be going to Yahweh's joyful plan.

Then came the Magi from the East following a star that they said had been set in the heavens specially to lead them to us, to Jesus. When they had finished showering Jesus with gifts beyond our imagining, they informed us they had been told in a dream that we needed to get out of this country as King Herod was after us. We knew what that meant, although we could not really imagine why. We were no threat to him. We knew of his ruthlessness, even killing his own family to hold on to his power. But we knew about dreams

and we knew about Yahweh and his protection. So when the Magi left, we travelled with them, under their protection, until they turned for home and we turned for Egypt, where our ancestors had once found safety, and then slavery

The Lord says, "Surely you know that the darkness will not hide you and the night will become light around you. For you even the darkness will not be dark; the night will shine like the day, for darkness is as light to you."

So here we are in the Temple in Jerusalem, giving thanks to Yahweh for his protection as we travelled, as we lived and worked and brought up our son in an alien land, a refugee fleeing from the persecution of a ruthless Ruler. But. But all this, will this be an end or is this just a beginning? Will we be allowed to live our our lives in peace? I am minded of the Psalmist who wrote;

"For you created my inmost being; you knit me together in my mother's womb. I praise you because I am fearfully and wonderfully made; your works are wonderful, I know that full well. My frame was not hidden from you when I was made in the secret place, when I was woven together in the depths of the earth. Your eyes saw my unformed body; all the days ordained for me were written in your book before one of them came to be."

I know now that I am a much desired child of my parents. I know in my heart that I am loved and cared for by Yahweh. He has placed on me burdens that I never thought that I could carry, but I do because I know that he is with me guiding me and protecting me.

"How precious to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them. Were I to count them, they would outnumber the grains of sand— when I awake, I am still with you. Search me, God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

And the meaning of all this? That whatever I do in my life and beyond, I will never be alone, Yahweh will always be with me.