

There's Something About Mary

As someone who was raised Catholic and spent some time in a religious community of the Society of Mary, I have always been intrigued and drawn to certain aspects of Mary of Nazareth. The Nesbits always had a devotion to “The Blessed Mother” or “Our Lady” and the recitation or praying of the Rosary was often included in family gatherings. When I stopped worshipping God in the Catholic tradition, one of the things that did not disappear was my fascination, admiration, and respect for Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Now, this may rub some folks the wrong way, but you can take the boy out of the Catholic church, but you can't take all the Catholic church out of the boy. As my faith has hopefully matured, I look to the biblical aspects of Mary and how her place in society at the time of Jesus gives us examples of how we may choose to live out our Christian faith. But let's see what we know about her based on her presence in the Bible.

We know that Mary was a native of Nazareth in Galilee. Galilee was in the northern section of Israel and was also under Roman occupation at that time. Mary was a girl, most likely fourteen to sixteen

years of age, and was “betrothed” to a carpenter named Joseph.

Tradition tells us that she was the daughter of Anna and Joachim, a descendant of Leah and Jacob, and a member of the tribe of Judah.

Mary was technically single at the time of the Annunciation, when the angel Gabriel appeared to her, as recorded in the Gospel of Luke. It is only in Luke’s Gospel that we are told this and find the classic moment of Mary’s being “voluntold” by the angel, saying “yes” to God, and giving birth to Jesus. Indeed, Luke provides us with a valuable perspective and essentially tells Mary’s side of the story. In our Bible study in 2024, we learned that perhaps some characteristics of Mary could be “brave, humble, thoughtful, practical, trusting, resilient, and faithful. In Luke’s Gospel, Mary speaks 182 words. While she is mentioned in all four Gospels, she does only “speak” in Luke and John. Five of those words have taken on a very important meaning for me in my life.

As I previously mentioned, I spent some time with the Society of Mary, or “Marianists.” The Marianists use the phrase “Do whatever He tells you” as their touchstone or even tag line. It is what brought me to

the United Church of Christ and the Congregational church in 2007. I spent a lot of time sitting, praying, listening, and then responding to what may have been told to me. I say “may have” because I am still waiting to see how this whole thing called “life” turns out. However, so far—so good! This phrase led me to answer the call of the congregation at Wilbraham United Church to ordained ministry and ultimately to serve the two churches of Southwick Congregational and First Congregational of Westfield. You wouldn’t think that an ordained minister in a mainline Protestant church would tell you that he got here because of Mary! But all of us can learn something from Mary.

Her initial yes teaches us that we should honor the young among us, for God sometimes gives them huge tasks. Often, the young person doesn’t even know that they are being called. I believe that we can also learn to ponder and ask questions, and then freely give of ourselves to God’s work. Mary certainly asked questions of the angel Gabriel before she uttered her response. I think it is ok to say, “Why me?” when you feel you’re being called. Just listen for an answer to your question. We

often go along and give ourselves to God's work even though all of our questions have not yet been answered.

Mary shows us how we can devote ourselves to God out of love rather than rewards. Last week, we spoke of our devotion to God out of love and not out of obligation. Mary of Nazareth continues that. She was present in Jesus' life from conception to ministry to crucifixion to resurrection. She was truly the first disciple! We cannot prove that she took any credit, but even in her Magnificat in Luke's Gospel, Mary gives credit to God. "The Almighty has done great things for me; holy is God's name."

I believe in the months to come, many things are going to be asked of us, especially as we take care of the needs of people whom we now recognize as our neighbors. May Mary's "yes" and her words of "Do whatever He tells you" serve as our guide as we figure out the next steps as we spread the Gospel message in action, and, if necessary, using words. Amen.