

Our Sister in Faith
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Mitch Albom wrote this great book called *Have a Little Faith: A True Story* and in the book he interviews his beloved childhood rabbi, an African American minister leading a dying church in Detroit, and he also reflects on his own life and faith journey. One of my favorite stories Albom tells in the book is from his own childhood as he reflects on being a Jewish kid growing up in a mostly Catholic neighborhood in New Jersey in the 1960s.

And here's what he says, "One morning, after a snowfall, a friend and I walk to school, wearing hooded jackets and rubber boots. We come upon a small house with a life-sized nativity scene on its front lawn. We stop. We study the figures. The wise men. The animals." "Is that one Jesus?" I ask.

"What one?" The one standing up. With the crown.

"I think that's his father."

"Is Jesus the other guy?"

"Jesus is the baby." Where? "In the crib, stupid." They continue to argue back and forth and dare each other to look closer at this baby Jesus in the crib.[1]

For two Jewish kids, the Christmas story we all hold so dear may be foreign and strange. I have always found it humbling over the years to try to explain the Christmas story to people who never grew up in the church or may be of a different faith or no faith at all. As funny as Mitch Albom and his friend pondering who Jesus was in the Nativity scene may be to us, I can actually relate on some levels being a Protestant kid growing up in a town with a large Catholic population with a mother who teaches at an all girls Catholic school.

I would roam the halls of my mom's school or drive past the Roman Catholic Church in my hometown and wonder what all those statues were about. In front of the Catholic Church in my hometown there's a prominent statue of Mary. Now I knew the statue was of Mary, but I was always a little perplexed. She's pictured with all these kids surrounding her, not the typical statue of Mary holding Jesus or Mary just on her own looking holy. Mary was surrounded by all these babies and she lit up at night, and I still drive by the church when I'm in town and I find myself staring at Mary wondering what to make of her.

When I was a hospital chaplain I had a Roman Catholic patient once ask me to pray a Hail Mary with her and I had to root around in my notebook for a note card I had swiped from the Catholic priest's office for just such an occasion. She laughed as I said, "Sure, I'll pray a Hail Mary with you, but first let me find my Hail Mary card, it's in my notebook here somewhere. . . ." "But don't you pray to the Blessed Mother?" she asked me. "Um, no, I can stumble through a Hail Mary, but I tend to pray to God and Jesus, not really anybody else."

I'd like to think that I'm not the only one here who may not know what to do with Mary sometimes or be able to say a flawless Hail Mary on command. Some of you former Catholics may even be saying that prayer in your head right now and that's cool. But I think the question of what to do with Mary can be a complicated one for Protestants in general.

Even if we believe in the Virgin Birth in theory, we probably still don't pray to Mary or revere Mary the way other Christians do. And if we have a hard time with the Virgin Birth, then we may really not know what to do with Mary. I mean, she is the mother of Jesus and that's significant. She raised him and taught him good values; she actually stood by him through it all, including his journey to the cross. And yet, what do we do with Mary?

The Annunciation, the text we read today is one of the most famous Biblical passages in which Mary is center stage with the Angel Gabriel. You'll recognize this passage on Christmas Eve, as the lines in the Christmas pageant are taken straight out of the Gospel of Luke. This is the passage where the Hail Mary originates. Many have translated the text, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you."^[2] Other translations say, "Hail, favored one! The Lord is with you." Hence, "Hail Mary, full of grace, our Lord is with you." It's also one of the few times in scripture Mary speaks. We get to hear Mary's voice; she's not just standing there looking holy or angelically holding her infant son in her arms, not that those pictures of Mary are not also wonderful. But Mary speaks!

Gabriel tells Mary that she's going to bear a son and she's to name him Jesus. "He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Most High, and the Lord God will give to him the throne of his ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end."^[3] This is a huge charge when you think about it. You are going to have a son and he is going to be one of the most significant leaders we've had in a long time. He will have a throne and a kingdom of sorts and will reign over his people in a way we haven't seen before.

Mary responds, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" As the conversation continues, Gabriel explains how all of this is going to happen and that even her cousin Elizabeth, in her old age, is going to have a child—who is John the Baptist by the way. And Mary ends by saying, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."^[4] This is the part that gets me every time—this trusting and unflinching acceptance on Mary's part.

She doesn't fight with Gabriel, she doesn't tell Gabriel that he's crazy and asks him to get out of her house because he's overwhelming her. She accepts that she has a part to play in this story—that she is to be the mother of a very important person, a future leader who will one day change the world as we know it. She probably is starting to get the impression that this role will require some sacrifices and she does it anyway. Oh, and did I mention that Mary was probably about 13 years old at the time? The age of betrothal in Jewish tradition was 12 ½, so we'll round up to 13.^[5] Mary is a young girl, and she agrees. She accepts that she has some work to do. "Let it be with me according to your word." What an incredible response.

Over time, I've come to think of Mary and refer to her as our "sister in faith." She shows pretty amazing trust in God time and again. I like to think of the Annunciation in more Protestant terms as her Call Story. And there are a ton of these in the Bible. Even today, ministers have to get used to people asking, "When did you receive your call to ministry? What happened? What was it like? Was it a moment in time or a gradual understanding that God intends you to be a minister?" But calls are not just for ministers, lots of people get called—to be prophets and apostles, to turn from their ways of sin and death and begin life anew, to respond to the needs of others. We are called even here and now in this church to be Christ's disciples in the world. I think that's a calling all Christians everywhere have—it's a calling to be a Christian and to live out our faith in the world, to love God completely and to love your neighbor as yourself.

So for me, the Annunciation is Mary's call story. This is the moment in time when Mary gets charged with a responsibility, with a vocation of sorts—hey Mary, you are going to be the mother of Jesus Christ, God incarnate. And she accepts her call. "Let it be with me according to your word."

Heather Murray Elkins, Professor of Worship and Preaching at Drew Theological School and a Methodist minister, tells a great story about Mary. She relates that in her first year of ministry a certain statue "came to live" in the corner of her office. On a Saturday morning her husband got a call from a friend—the family friend was hired to clear the grounds of a former Roman Catholic monastery that had been purchased by an oil corporation. And the friend got nervous about bulldozing over all the religious art and statues still on the grounds. So he called to offer these objects to anyone who wanted them.

Dr. Elkins and her husband set off on a rescue mission of Catholic art and walked the grounds of this monastery, in her words looking "at figures of two-thousand pound saints sentenced to rubble." They wondered what in the world they could possibly rescue with their bare hands and "drive to safety in an old VW Beetle." Finally, they walk around some more and find a statue that catches their eye—the figure of a young woman lying face down.

After turning this statue over and brushing off her face, they recognize this as a statue of Mary. "Her face is serene; curled around at her bare feet is a subdued serpent still clutching the eternal apple in its jaws. Mary's hands are missing." They searched the ground for her missing hands without success and as the light fades, they decide their rescue mission on these overgrown grounds of this former monastery was for Mary.

Husband and wife end up carrying this statue that weighs over a hundred pounds for a mile through the woods. More than once, Dr. Elkins relates, "She slips from our hands in the dark; more than once we have to grit our teeth, get a grip on our temper and trust by reciting, 'Nothing will be impossible with God.'" But they did rescue Mary that day and that statue has been proudly displayed in every office Dr. Elkins has ever occupied.

Often she has people stare in surprise at Mary in her office and ask. "Aren't you a Protestant?" "Oh yes," she says, "She's in my Bible."^[6]

So for all you former Catholics, I hate to think that you may feel or have felt that to become a Protestant you've had to leave Mary behind. And for those life-long Protestants, I'd hate to think that Mary is a religious figure we just can't figure out, won't pray to, and therefore she's not worth a whole lot of time and consideration. Mary is a woman who accepted a call from God at 13 years old. She is truly a remarkable figure in our Bible. Mary is our sister in faith. And I thank God for her example of trust, love, and devotion. Hail Mary, full of grace, our God was with you. Thanks be to God. Amen.

[1] Mitch Albom, *Have a Little Faith: A True Story*, 29.

[2] Luke 1:28 and Richard P. McBrien, *Lives of the Saints*, 144.

[3] Luke 1: 32-33

[4] Luke 1: 38.

[5] <http://campus.udayton.edu/mary/questions/faq/faq02.html>

[6] Dr. Heather Murray Elkins, *Disciplines: A Book of Daily Devotions*, 2011, 363.