

**- Saint John's Pulpit (Dec. 19, Fourth Sunday of Advent)
- "Those Who Made Advent: Mary" Luke 1:39-45**

³⁹ In those days Mary set out and went with haste to a Judean town in the hill country, ⁴⁰ where she entered the house of Zechariah and greeted Elizabeth. ⁴¹ When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the child leaped in her womb. And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴³ And why has this happened to me, that the mother of my Lord comes to me? ⁴⁴ For as soon as I heard the sound of your greeting, the child in my womb leaped for joy. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

How Much Do We Know About Mary?

Mary, who is she? We know the answer. She is a mother of Jesus. Don't get me wrong! I know that it is not Children's Bible Storytime. Oh, here is one more thing about Mary. Her husband is Joseph. Then, what else do we know about her?

Among the four Gospels in the Bible, there are only two books which are presenting a story of Nativity- Matthew and Luke. Mark is dealing with a story of Jesus when he began his ministry. John is narrating about Jesus from a different perspective. Unfortunately, we come to know that we know nothing about Mary indeed. Let me read Luke 1:26-27.

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27 to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary. Luke 1:26-27 NRSV

Indeed, Mary has been known from men's perspective only. For example, she is introduced as the mother of Jesus or a wife of Joseph. We cannot see any verses talking about Mary herself, as an individual. Do we know her age? How old she is? Usually, we know her age is 12 years old or so. But this may not be true. We only know that the Jewish tradition allowed (from) 12 years old girls to marry, so we assume that Mary is in that age group. Can we see who is her parents? Unfortunately, no idea! While Elizabeth, a mother of John the Baptist was introduced with her family background in the same chapter, Luke 1, but Mary's family background is still veiled.

Here is one more question. Do you think Mary was pretty? Many people assume that she was pretty. But how we could know she was pretty or not? Interestingly, the Bible never mentions her appearance! The Bible introduces many women of faith as beautiful ones such as Sarah, Esther, Rahab, Bathsheba, and so on. What about Mary? The only thing we know is she is from Nazareth (known as a very country area), and her name is Mary. Simply speaking, Mary was not like Olivia Hussey!

So, many things about Mary are unknown. This ambiguity became a mystery, and this mystery became a seed of lots of stories vulnerable to make, create, and manipulate!

Several weeks ago, when I was leading my Advent Bible study I had a really good discussion about Joseph, Mary's husband with the study members. Like Mary, how much do you know about Joseph? How old he was?

After this service, I'd like to recommend you to search Joseph's image on Google. Surprisingly, most pictures of Joseph depict him as an old man! Roughly he looks over 90 years old man in many pictures, especially in a Roman Catholic or Orthodox church tradition.

Christians in the second century began to ask about Joseph. They strongly wanted Mary to keep her virginity. In other words, in their eyes, Mary should be a mother of Jesus, conceived by the Holy Spirit only! With regard to this,

in his book *The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem* Adam Hamilton presents,

"They began to teach that Joseph was an elderly widower when he married Mary; one source says he was 93 at the time and lived to be 111, dying when Jesus was 18. This tradition seemed to have developed as a way of asserting that a kind elderly gentleman took Mary in to care for her, and since he was more like a grandfather than a husband, the marriage was never consummated and Mary remained a virgin throughout her life."

The Journey: Walking the Road to Bethlehem / Adam Hamilton, p.41

Thus, when you see your Nativity sets or paintings, if Joseph looks like an old man, it is from a Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox tradition. Of course, Protestant portraits tend to show Joseph as a young man. Do you like this interpretation? Anyhow, Mary looks so miserable in many ways because she was a victim of dogma by people.

Mary's Perspective to See God's blessings

As we have noted, we are surprised to see that we actually do not know about Mary. However, like the movie title a long time ago, THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT MARY! The Bible uses the word "blessed" three times for Mary! Let me read Luke 1:41-42, and 45.

And Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit ⁴² and exclaimed with a loud cry, "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. ⁴⁵ And blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord." Luke 1:41b-42, and 45 NRSV

Like mother, like son... just like John the Baptist introduced Jesus Christ to people as their Messiah, his mother Elizabeth introduced Mary as the most blessed woman in the Bible!

But her reality was totally different. It is hard to believe that Mary was cared for by people when she was pregnant, the most important time for women. She had to struggle with her pregnancy physically and emotionally. No 'prenatal' vitamins, but the word 'precarious' became her middle name.

Couldn't have Ultrasound check-up, but ultra-troubles. She was afraid of Joseph worrying about his reaction or response. All gossips from people became a snowball.

Dreaming her sweet honeymoon? No, she never had her honeymoon. No five-star hotel, banquet, and dance party. Could she see her ob-gyn doctor? Nay. Her birthing room was stable. Instead of a cute footprint for her baby, she had to concern the dirt on her baby's foot! After her delivery, she had to move to Egypt with her family hurriedly. Hard to say it was a family vacation. It was an emergency evacuation!

Indeed, it appears that she is far from the word 'blessed', but the Bible says she is blessed among women. Why was she blessed? What about this interpretation? Mary was blessed because she was in God's plan. She was used by God's great plan to save all. The point is this. It takes time to realize God's blessings in our life because it comes immediately, or later. However, if we are in His plan, and used by the Lord, we are blessed.

One big irony is this. The Bible does not say Mary was pretty, but Mary has been regarded or illustrated as a beautiful woman through movies, paintings, musicals, dramas, and all artworks! Mary is not in a stable now. She is in all beautiful and luxurious churches, cathedrals, and museums with her beautiful and graceful smiling! I am not sure whether she knows this or not. Although her actual life was not easy, among little girls, Mary is always their most favorite role whenever they plan the Nativity skit dramas or musicals in their churches! No one wants to act sheep no.1, sheep 2, and sheep 3... Mary is a dream role for all little girls!

Here is a question for you. Do you think you are blessed now? It is the second Christmas during the pandemic. Lots of bad news we hear now such as shootings, disasters, signs of conflicts or wars among countries, financial hardships, disruptive voices, and so on. Many things around us discourage us feel we are blessed. But please know this. Those who made their first Advent already experienced what we feel now. The only difference was that they trusted God faithfully. They clearly knew that their life could be blessed not by their time and plan, but by God's time and plan. As long as we are in the Lord, we would be blessed all the time. Merry Christmas!