

A Sermon for DaySpring

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“When The Story becomes Your Story”

The fourth in an Advent Series

Luke 1: 39-45

December 21, 2003

Most of you have seen a “Hail Mary.” It’s become the name of the play the losing team does in the last seconds of the game.

All the receivers wide to the right...

Quarterback in the shotgun...

And one long, high pass to the end zone.

Occasionally, once in a season or so... the pass will land in the lap of some lucky receiver and the fans will storm the field in exultation.

You’ve seen a Hail Mary... maybe thrown or caught one.

Ever prayed one? An Ave Maria... Latin for “Hail Mary?” It’s a common devotional prayer for Catholics... repeated usually as a centering kind of mantra... and as a prayer of petition.

The prayer is made up of two verses... two greetings. The first from the Angel Gabriel when he gives her the big news. Artists often picture her at a desk fervently in prayer or making some clothes... knitting basically.

This year, I’ve been trying to picture her outside... She’s walking home down some dusty Nazarene Street after spending some time with her friends... doing girl talk about her upcoming wedding... giggling about how cute Joseph is. Then out of nowhere, Gabriel comes up and walks alongside her maybe... looks sort of normal but with just a bit of a glow about him.

“Greetings, you who are highly favored”...

or **“Hail”** (angels like to say that)...

“Hail there... Gracy...

You there, with lots of God’s favor,

The Lord is with you.”

That’s the first part of an Ave Maria.

The second line comes from Elizabeth’s greeting. Mary goes to see her cousin... to get out of town before she starts to show... and for sure to have someone to talk to who has some idea of what she’s going through.

Mary walks in the living room... Elizabeth who’s in her 70s and her last trimester, grabs her walker and manages to get up to greet her. And when she does, John the Baby Baptist gives her a swift kick in the ribs...

“Woe...” And she “proclaims loudly” because she’s old and she can’t hear.

“Blessed are you among women and blessed is the child you bear.”

That’s the second half of the prayer. So an Ave Maria is, **“Hail Mary, full of grace, blessed are thou amongst women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”** It was first put together as a prayer in the 12th century.

It became a prayer... but first it was two greetings and three amazing lines of affirmation. Talk about your positive strokes. If Mary really was an adolescent, any self-esteem problems she might have had just disappeared.

You are favored...

God is with you... (and you're about to find out just how much with you.)

And last... **blessed are you among women.**

While devotion to Mary didn't really take off until the Middle Ages... (just a little fun historical fact to know and tell)... the early Church came to see this moment and came to see in Mary, something unique... one of a kind.

This was the incarnation of God into the world and Mary was the channel. She was called the Theotokos... the God-Bearer.

This is what the church came to proclaim... about Mary and certainly about this event in redemptive history.

It wasn't a claim we made over night, you should know. There was a couple of centuries of interesting conversation and often-heated debate over just how unique this moment was. The disciples didn't wake up the morning after the resurrection and say, **"We got this all figured out. John, write this down, why don't you."**

There were lots of questions and lots of ideas and opinions about the nature of Jesus and what in fact took place cosmically in Mary and at Bethlehem...

"How unique was Jesus?" Is one way of asking the question. **"How unique is this event that 'occurs in the fullness of time'? How special is Mary."**

Remember, folks didn't have the Bible you have on their coffee tables. They had an Old Testament canon, some of them, at least...

And they had copies of this or that gospel...

and gospels that didn't make it into the canon.

And they had this or that letter from Paul

or some other leader...

And there was this or that teacher influencing this or that church. Honestly for several hundred years it was sort of a mess.

Among the faithful believers though... among those who were having an encounter with this new faith, there was no real debate that God had done something wonderful... and done it in the person and work of Jesus. Figuring out and thinking through the nature of it took a little time... about three centuries.

And again, one of the real debates was... **"Is Jesus totally unique...is the incarnation, one of a kind... or is Jesus the template. Is God's work in Jesus a pattern... something that we can all experience?"**

The church in the West answered yes to the former question... Jesus is unique. The church in the East, which we know very little about, seems to have said a yes to the latter question. **"Jesus is the pattern for what we'll all become."** We in the Western half of Christian history gave our vote to Jesus being completely unique... and eventually they voted on that in creedal form. Remember Nicea?

“I believe in... one Lord Jesus Christ, the only-begotten Son of God... God of God... Light of Light... very God of very God... one substance with the Father.”

So Jesus was unique... Jesus was God...
and Mary was... the Mother of God.
The Theotokos.

Elizabeth was right. Mary was **“blessed among women.”** Gabriel said it well strolling down Main Street in Nazareth. **“You have God’s favor and the Lord Himself really is with you.”**

This is what we’ll affirm again on Christmas Eve... **“The Word, who was in the beginning with God, who was God... this Logos came and dwelt for a while among us.”** It happened in history... on someone’s calendar. The Divine was conceived. When Mary carried Jesus within her and when she finally held him, she was rocking the Eternal.

That’s what we proclaim... and by faith confess.

My question this morning is... is it possible for East to meet West? Is the truth of Christmas a paradoxical both/and? Stay with me... Just scrunch up your forehead and stay with me.

Can our faith be that God was emptied and poured out in a unique way in a unique moment in time in Jesus for redemption’s sake... And can our faith also be that this is what God is doing in us?

Can’t we look at the manager and say, **“Wow... Emmanuel God with us,”** while at the same time going into our nursery, in our church, peering over the edge of the beautiful infants there, and saying, **“Wow, if that’s not the spitting image of the Divine, I don’t know what is”?**

Can’t we hear these words to Mary this morning... **“You’re favored... the Lord is with you... blessed are you”** while at the same time knowing that they are meant for each of us as well.

**“You are favored... you and you and you... are full of God’s grace.
And the Lord is with you... not off separated by anything... with you.
Not cut off from you... hiding from you... distant from you... with you.
The Lord is with you...
and also with you...”**

I’ve said it before... what’s true cosmically will be true historically and will be true personally. Israel’s story is your story. Mary’s story is your story. The Divine was within Mary... and is within you. Genesis said it in chapter one, **“you’re made in God’s image.”** Jesus said it, **“The kingdom is within you.”** Paul said it... **“Christ in you is the hope of glory.”**

I love those great words of the medieval mystic Eckhart, **“We are all meant to be mothers of God. What good is it to me if the eternal birth of the divine Son takes place... but does not take place within myself? And, what good is it to me if Mary is full of grace if I am not also full of grace? What good is it to me for the Creator to give birth his Son if I do not also give birth to him in my time and my culture...”**

God acted in history at Bethlehem in Mary...
 and God is acting in you...
 in our time... and for our time.

You are highly favored and the Lord is with you. It will change your life to believe that. It'll change the way you read the Bible... it'll change how you see things. It'll change what you think about your time here... and what God can do with you. The message to Mary is also meant for you.

I read a story this week about a church drama troupe that did one of those “desert and drama” things for their church in the fellowship hall. A couple of weeks before Christmas, they did Charles Dickens, **“A Christmas Carol.”**

They put all the folding chairs around the stage and transformed the hall into a dinner theatre kind of thing. Created a few stage lights... And some makeshift backdrops of the tenements and sooty chimneys of nineteenth century London.

When the audience gathered and were handed their programs, some of the folks thought it was pretty funny that the part of Ebenezer was being played by the chairman of the deacons... who was this very gentle, quiet, un-Scrooge-like, generous guy.

They were surprised at how good he was and by how much energy he put into the part... He growled along and shouted **“Bah! Humbug!”** as grumpily as anyone ever has. He shivered and looked terrified by the ghosts... all that.

In the final scene, you'll remember, Scrooge has been transformed and he's full of joy and hanging out of his bedroom window yelling “erry Christmas” to everyone.

And he's wanting to give some gifts and looking for someone to help him... remember. He sees this little “street urchin” passing by and he shouts down at him... **“Hey you, boy, you there! Come up here boy, I've got something wonderful for you to do!”**

Well, when Mr. Chairman of the Deacons, AKA Ebenezer Scrooge yelled that line from the window, something amazing happened. A six-year-old boy in the audience, seated with his family who were members of the church, spontaneously rose from his chair in response to the call and walked on stage ready to do something wonderful.

This threw the actor off for a second... he stuttered... blinked
 The audience held its breath...

“What's he going to do?”

Well, he bounded from his window, walked confidently across the stage and hugged the little boy, **“Yes, indeed,”** he belts out his blessing, **“you are the one, the very one I had in mind.”** (Thomas Long, Whispering the Lyrics)

“Blessed are you... you who are so full of grace. The Lord is with you.”
 Words for a one-in-a-million moment... but also words for you. If you can hear them that way. You are the one God has in mind. God is with you and has something wonderful for you to do. Amen.