

Hail Mary

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Readings:

Luke 1:26-38

Canticle 15 (Luke 1:46b-55)

Hail Mary, Full of Grace, the Lord is with thee

Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.

It's not every Sunday we hear about Mary in two of our passages from scripture; in fact, it's not very many Sundays at all. Our faith tradition does not have the same devotion to Mary that Roman Catholics do. Few of us pray the 'Hail Mary,' the prayer I started with in the beginning. But we do pray Mary's words. This morning we all prayed Mary's words in the *Magnificat*. You might not know much about Mary. So let me tell you more about her.

Mary is poor, presumably Jewish. She's engaged but unwed. She's young; younger than all of us here. She's living at her parents home. And she gets visited by an Angel; a messenger of God.

Now the angel had already brought a word; first the angel came to an older priest, Zechariah. Zechariah was a member of the religious establishment; he was a good man, and his wife Elizabeth was a good woman. Mary and Elizabeth were cousins, though Elizabeth was much older than her. The Angel met Zechariah in church, at the altar. Zechariah's terrified. An Angel at the altar?? Who would have thought!

Do not be afraid.

Well Zechariah was afraid, and when the angel gave the news that he was to be a father to John the Witness, he laughed out loud. He says in fewer words: my prayer answered? That's impossible. My wife is barren; I'm too old. God can't do that. That's not how this works.

Well, surely enough, the angel replied with a sign he could understand: Zechariah lost his voice until the day his son was born.

Meanwhile, Elizabeth, true to the angel's word, conceived.

Elizabeth, who had been a disgrace because she was unable to bear a child, is redeemed by God through God's action. Elizabeth becomes a mother.

Gabriel returns then to bring a message to Mary.

Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you.

Hail Mary, full of grace!

Mary ponders: what might this mean? Who am I that the Lord is with *me*?

You will bear a son, and you will name him Jesus. He is the Son of God. You will carry God's own son in your womb. And as a sign of this, look what *is happening* to your relative, Elizabeth. She bore a son in her barrenness; Nothing is impossible with God.

And Mary responds: here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.

Let it be with me according to your word.

Now this line is key; for later, Jesus says "My mother and my brothers are those who hear the word of God and do it."

Let it be with me according to your word: Mary hears the word of God and does it. Mary is the first disciple, and the first example to us of accepting the word of God.

Now the angel has given her tangible proof, just like he silenced Zechariah. So Mary goes to see Elizabeth. When she arrives, Elizabeth is filled with the Holy Spirit. She becomes the channel for God's word and says

"Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

"Blessed art thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus."

Her child, John, kicks. The text says that he leaps for joy; I say that he points. For as the Holy Spirit moved through his mother John gets the first chance to fulfill his call to be a witness; from the womb, into the wilderness he witnesses to the presence of Christ in Mary, mother of Jesus.

Hail Mary, Full of Grace!

Now it's Mary's turn: and Mary proclaims the greatness of the Lord. Here in this Spirit-filled encounter with her cousin, woman to woman she rejoices that God has acted: God has done great things for her. God's name Is holy.

Mary receives the blessing and favor of God, and first she worships God. Then she proclaims what God has done. She that God has scattered the proud (looking at you, Zechariah), brought down the powerful, sent the rich away. And God has had mercy, remember his promises, lifted up the lowly, and fed the hungry. God has done all this in the past, and God will continue to have mercy through the work of her son Jesus Christ. In this moment Mary remembers the past, the story of God's work amongst her people; and she brings forward the future, where Jesus, Immanuel, God-with-us will make God known to us and save us from ourselves.

Too often, we find ourselves like Zechariah. We are the proud. We are the rich. We are without God.

We find ourselves surprised when and where God shows up. God shows up in the poor, the lowly, the wilderness. God shows up and we say, no, no. We don't say yes, like John, Elizabeth, or Mary. We find ourselves in prayer and tell the angel he can take his business elsewhere. We read the Word of our God in holy scripture and are convicted on Sunday, but we leave it to ourselves to determine what is best for us on Monday. We render ourselves speechless, until the fulfillment of God's work in our lives.

But it doesn't have to be this way. God does not want it to be this way. That's why we need to listen to Elizabeth and Mary and all the mothers in our lives. We need to see the faithful women who say YES to God and say YES too Jesus and say YES to the Holy Spirit and we need to emulate them too. We need to look to the Mother Teresas who fill the hungry with good things, and to our own mothers and grandmothers who raised us up in the faith. We need to be more like them. We need to listen to their proclamations of the greatness of the Lord.

And the mothers in our lives, the disciples and prophets and followers of Jesus, they don't need to be limited to women. St. Paul saw himself as a mother! He speaks to the Corinthians as those he gave milk to drink, for they were not ready for solid food. He speaks to the Galatians as his children, with whom he's in labor pains! He speaks about all of creation groaning in labor pains in the letter to the Romans! Motherhood means all of us! Saying YES to God means all of us!

But today, most of all, we remember Mary, mother of our Lord. Mary, as a young, single, vulnerable woman, said yes to God. Mary carried our savior in her womb. Mary risked her life to travel to and fro avoiding those who would have this new King, this Messiah, killed before he was ever born. Mary, who declared that those mighty people were cast down and that her Son would feed the hungry and raise up the lowly. Mary, who first accepted the Word of God. Mary, the first disciple. Mary, Mary, Mary!

*Holy Mary, Mother of God,
pray for us sinners,
now and at the hour of our death.
Amen.*