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A Remembrance of St. Mary, Mother of Our Lord

Luke 1:26-55 – Blessed Mary, Full of Grace

8/11-15/21 – Good Shepherd Lutheran Church, Beaver Dam, WI

The “Ave Maria” is widely regarded as one of the most beautiful pieces of sacred music ever written. If you can hear it in your head, chances are you’re hearing its most famous version that was composed by Franz Schubert. It’s very often played at Catholic masses and it was even adapted for the old Disney movie *Fantasia*. In fact, Roman Catholics have been praying and hearing the “Ave Maria” in their services for 1,000 years now. It’s based on what the angel Gabriel said to Mary in Luke 1:28 and it translates from the Latin as “Hail Mary, Full of Grace.”

However, there’s a reason that’s not played in Lutheran Churches. First of all, it was never meant as a song of praise like the rest of the liturgical songs we sing as a part of our worship services. It was simply the angel’s greeting to Mary, and it certainly wasn’t the heart of the message that he came to bring her that day. But secondly and most importantly, it asks things of Mary that were never intended to be asked.

See, the first verse of that Latin song – if we’re being charitable – sticks fairly close to the words of Scripture, but the second verse is what really veers off track. It says, “*Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now, and at the hour of our death.*” That’s a dealbreaker for us, because only God is holy and it’s only God to whom our prayers should be addressed. And in fact, this is an issue that was at the core of the Lutheran Reformation. As Lutherans, we always look for the narrow middle road. We don’t want to put too much reliance or credit on Mary or the saints, because that only takes away from what rightly belongs to Christ. But we also don’t want to ignore them or despise them, because that’s not what the Scriptures intend, either. So we can’t say “Hail Mary, full of grace” in the way Rome says it. But we can say “blessed Mary, full of grace” in the way Scripture teaches it, because then we will see that blessing and grace came to Mary not because of what she does, but because of what the Triune God does for her.

So about that translation, “Hail Mary, full of grace” – it’s a little too loose and a little too misleading. Here’s again what the angel said to Mary more literally: “*Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you.*” That angel wasn’t *hailing* Mary there as if he were praising or acclaiming a VIP. This was just the common, friendly way of greeting people in those days. And Mary was “full of grace” only in the sense that she *was highly favored by God*. That’s a passive idea that had nothing to do with her own activity or character. In other words, *she* was the one who was graced by the *Lord’s* presence, not the other way around.

So Mary wasn’t being *praised* here; she was being *blessed*. And she wasn’t *dispensing* grace to others; she was *receiving* grace from God. See, Mary was under no illusions that she was better than anyone else or that her own merits earned any special treatment from God. In fact, in some

ways she could hardly have been any lower on society’s totem pole. After all, she lived in Nazareth in Galilee, which as far as most Jews were concerned, was just a backwoods place full of low-lives, shady characters, and religious half-breeds. Now she was a descendant of King David, and that was a pretty big name in the history of Israel – but hanging your hat on somebody’s name that ruled 1,000 years ago really just makes you a has-been.

See, in the eyes of the world, Mary was a nobody and she knew it. When that angel finished delivering his message, she said, “*I am the Lord’s servant,*” and actually that word could be much stronger: she even considered herself a *slave* before God. She was fully aware of her humble state – she even sang about it after she went to meet Elizabeth later in our text. But most of all, Mary’s lowliness consisted in the fact that she was a sinner – she was born sinful from two sinful parents, just like all the rest of us; she was afraid to stand before God’s holy messenger, just like it happened for everyone else before her; and she confessed that God was the Savior she needed, because only he was great enough and holy enough and gracious enough to do it.

Nothing in this story or in all of Scripture would lead us to praise Mary, at least not to the extent that she’s been idolized in the Roman Catholic Church. In fact, it seems like she least of all would want that kind of attention. No, she wasn’t *praised* or *hailed* here; she was *blessed*. So that means Mary isn’t the real protagonist in this story. Our gracious God is, because he came to her with all his blessings and used her to fulfill all his promises. Again, she was blessed and full of grace not because of what she does, but because of what the Triune God does for her.

And you can see that in each part of the story here. When the angel Gabriel first came to Mary, it says she was greatly troubled by his words. But then the angel shared a message of comfort: “*Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God.*” See, God didn’t want to scare her or harm her; he wanted to shower her with his grace and favor. That’s why he reached out to her, undeserving though she was. Mary found favor with God not because of who she was, but because of who He is; not because of *her* goodness, but because of *His* goodness. She found favor with God simply because God was looking to show it. He dropped it right in her lap.

But that wasn’t the best part yet: “*You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.*” These were words that every Israelite woman had been hoping to hear since the beginning of time. Ever since God’s first Gospel promise to Adam and Eve that he would send a Savior from the offspring of the woman, that promise passed down through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, David, and now to... Mary? A promise like that lots of people might have expected to find fulfillment in a queen or princess in Jerusalem or Rome – someone important somewhere important – but no. *This* is how our gracious God works: exalting the lowly, lifting up the humble, choosing and using ordinary folks like Mary and even like us to accomplish his good purposes, because *this* is what pure grace looks like!

God the Father would send God the Son into our world by being conceived by the Holy Spirit and born of the Virgin Mary. She would get the unique privilege of being called the mother of God, because she would give birth to the Son of God in the flesh! She would be the mother of her own eternal Savior from sin and death and hell! How mind-boggling must that have been?

Probably too mind-boggling for a lot of people. But Mary just believed, and then the Lord even gave her a sign to confirm his promise: her relative Elizabeth was going to have a child in her old age, and if God could work that kind of miracle, then why couldn't he do this, too? Well when Mary heard that, she got ready and headed for the hill country of Judea where Elizabeth lived. But before Mary and Elizabeth even got past their hellos, our gracious Triune God proved that he was at work once again: "*When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: 'Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!'*" Yes, what that angel said to Mary about Elizabeth having a baby was true. Yes, it was true that the Virgin Mary was going to have a baby, too. And yes, growing in Mary's womb already was the Lord himself, the fulfillment of all the ages, the one through whom all nations would be blessed, the one who would rule God's people forever. The Father planned it. The Spirit confirmed it. The Son fulfilled it. Truly, Mary was the most blessed of all women and the Triune God was filling her so full of grace that her cup was overflowing.

No, Mary wasn't *praised or hailed or worshiped* here; she was *blessed*. So that means we won't *praise* her like that, either – but we certainly can *learn* from her example. And the first thing we can learn from Mary here is her attitude of willing service. When the angel told Mary that she was going to conceive and have a son, she didn't doubt or object – she simply said, "*I am the Lord's servant. May your word to me be fulfilled.*" I mean, think about how much harder this would have made her life. How would she explain this to Joseph, her new husband? What kinds of assumptions and accusations of adultery would she have to put up with in the public eye for the rest of her life? Whatever life plans Mary and Joseph may have had on their own were totally thrown out the window here! But Mary went along with it anyway, because she trusted that if this was from God, then it must be good for her and best for God's plans for this world, no matter how it might look at times. That's an attitude that we can learn from, especially when our lives, our jobs, our education, our homes, our relationships don't follow our plans. Our God is always in control, and his purposes for us are always meant for our benefit both spiritually and eternally.

Then the next thing we can learn from Mary is her humble faith in God. She knew where her gracious blessings came from, and she didn't let anything else get in the way. So let's not let anything get in the way of our relationship with God, either – not the saints, not the angels, not sports or sports stars, not politics or politicians, not science or academia or Hollywood. No, the

Lord had made some amazing promises to Mary – promises to do things that had never been seen in the history of the world and would never be seen again. Yet she didn't doubt or waver; as Elizabeth said, "*Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!*" See, Mary trusted God's Word because she knew God's character. He is all-powerful, he is all-knowing, he cannot lie, and his love for us never fails. So if the God who created this universe decided that he wanted Mary to be an integral part of how he redeemed this universe, who was she to say no? And who are we to say no to God's promises to us, either, regardless of what science or society says? That same all-powerful, all-knowing, never lying, never failing God is still watching over us and taking care of us, too. So when he says he can get you through whatever is troubling you, trust him. When he says he has plans to bless you in ways you might not always see or understand, trust him. And when he says that his ultimate goal for you is to deliver you home to heaven in his own way and time, just trust him, because the God who did miracles for Mary can still do miracles for you, too.

Then finally, the last thing we can learn here from Mary is about her relationship with Elizabeth. Who could Mary tell all this to who would actually understand and believe her, instead of doubt her and judge her? Who could she confide in? Who could she rejoice with? Mary and Elizabeth had that special connection because they both were playing special parts in God's plan of salvation, and God made us to need this kind of encouragement and support from our fellow believers. So even though our stories might not be as supernatural or historically significant as theirs, this kind of companionship and camaraderie is still good and needed in our lives, too. So friends, find some fellow Christians to lean on and confide in – find your strength and belonging right here in the fellowship of the Church! – because then we can be there for each other, we can lift each other up, and we can spur each other on as we persevere together faithfully down this path of life toward heaven.

No, Mary isn't our Savior. She herself confessed that *God* was her Savior, just like us. She isn't our Redeemer or Mediator, either – there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus. And when a woman once came to Jesus and tried to put that kind of undue attention on her, "*Blessed is the mother who gave you birth and nursed you,*" Jesus turned our focus right back to where it really belongs: "*Blessed rather are those who hear the Word of God and obey it*" (Lk. 11:27-28).

When the Lord did great things for Mary, she magnified *him*. She trusted in his promises. She was humble to the last. And so she gave us a great example to imitate. So instead of singing the *Ave Maria* to Mary, let's join with Mary and sing the *Magnificat* to the Lord. Let's not praise Mary; rather, let's praise *God for Mary* and for the endurance and encouragement of all the rest of the saints who have gone before us. Let's use this day to remember with thanks God's blessing and grace to St. Mary, the mother of our Lord, but let's most of all remember that Mary had a Son – *he* is our Savior, he is our Redeemer and Mediator, and he deserves the full focus of our faith for now and forevermore. In Jesus' Name. Amen.