

**Rev. Tina Lang • Sunday, December 27, 2015**  
**Texts: Colossians 3:12-17 and Luke 2:41-52**

# Hail Mary, Full of Grace



First United  
Methodist Church

DOWNTOWN FOR GOOD

203 Wisconsin Avenue | Madison, WI 53703

608-256-9061 | [www.fumc.org](http://www.fumc.org)

“Hail Mary, full of grace!” It’s a phrase we Protestants don’t use very often and I think that’s unfortunate. We might be missing something. I think our Catholic friends have something important to teach us here.

For the most part, Protestants and Catholics now have good, open relationships, but as a child growing up in the 1960s, I remember feeling very much like an “outsider” when I attended church with one of my Catholic friends. Of course there were pieces of the mass that felt similar to worship in the Methodist Church, but there was a lot that felt really different, and as a nine year-old, one of the most obvious differences was the iconography and all the visual imagery.

In my church, there wasn’t that much to look at. There was a brass cross sitting on the altar table at the front of the sanctuary and a few other crosses throughout the sanctuary. One on the top of an elaborately carved sign board that listed numbers of hymns we were to sing, the amount of the previous week’s offering and the number of previous week’s attendees, and there were small crosses on the covers of the hymnals. There were some symbols in the stained glass windows, and in the basement, the room dividers that were used to create Sunday school spaces each held a few standard pictures like Jesus the Good Shepherd, Jesus sleeping in a storm-tossed boat, and Jesus with children. But when I entered the Catholic Church, the first thing I noticed was the abundance of imagery and much of it was very different.

They had a huge cross hanging above their communion table and Jesus was there, hanging on the cross. They had small wooden boxes attached to the walls all around the perimeter of the sanctuary. They looked to me, like very fancy versions of dioramas we sometimes made in art class, and each one of those fancy dioramas was an intricately carved depiction of what they called the “stations of the cross,” something I’d never heard of in my Protestant church.

There were other sculptures and statues too, on the floor around the edges of the room. But the most fascinating thing to me, was the special little alcove set off to the side of the main chancel area. It seemed almost like a tiny little chapel of its own, right there in the larger sanctuary, and what was really amazing, was that Jesus didn’t seem to be the focus of that space, because the dominant feature of that little alcove was a very large statue not of Jesus, but of Mary. And I noticed that people would go to that little area and kneel in prayer before the statue of Mary. And when I went to that or other Catholic churches for weddings, the bride and groom would do the same thing. At a certain point in the marriage ceremony they would step away from the rest of the bridal party and go over to that special little alcove to kneel and pray in front of the statue. And as the couple kneeled before Mary in prayer, someone would sing a song called *Ave Maria* which I never heard in my church. I didn’t know what the song was about because the words were in Latin, but I did know that Maria was Mary so it seemed clear that Mary was the focus of the song and she was the focus of those praying at her statue.

Coming from the Methodist Church, this focus on Mary was completely foreign. Up to that point in my life, I think I had only heard Mary mentioned very briefly as part of the Christmas story. Other than that she just wasn’t talked about. She certainly didn’t seem worthy of her own special little alcove and I was simply amazed that people would kneel before her in prayer. Were they praying TO Mary? I thought prayer was something that was always and only directed toward God. It seemed perfectly okay to pray to Jesus because even though he was a human being, I had been taught that, in some mysterious way, he was also God, but Mary wasn’t God. Why would people kneel before her? Why would people pray to her? Where did this incredible reverence for Mary come from?

Well, the answers to those questions are rooted in the scripture passages we’ve read over this past week; the passage read last Sunday, the passage read on Christmas Eve, and the passage read this morning; all three from the Gospel according to Luke, the only one of the canonical gospels to tell us Mary’s story.

So for all us football fans, it turns out that “Hail Mary” isn’t just an incredible touchdown pass. And for all us lifelong Protestants who’ve not taken the time to explore the rich traditions of the Catholic Church, it turns out that “Hail Mary” isn’t just something the Catholics made up. “Hail Mary” is a statement that reflects profound reverence for the woman who Mothered God’s redemption of the human

world, and that reverence comes to us from the written tradition of the early church, dating all the way back to the writer of the Gospel according to Luke. Actually, it goes back beyond Luke because it's not just Luke, the storyteller who has reverence for Mary; the reverence for Mary comes from two of the major characters of her story: an angel named Gabriel and more importantly, reverence for Mary comes from God!

Last Sunday, Pastor Phil preached from the first chapter of Luke. We heard the story of Gabriel visiting Mary and greeting her saying, "Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you." Our contemporary New Revised Standard version expressed it a little differently. Instead of "Hail Mary, full of grace" it says "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you" but those are just different words that say the same thing; just as the song *Ave Maria* is different words that say the same thing. "Ave Maria:" Latin for: "Hail Mary", "Gratia plena: full of grace", "Dominus tecum: the Lord is with you."

So there it is. In our first introduction to Mary, an angel, on God's behalf, approaches her with words of great honor, and the angel is explicit that the honor is for the grace that is distinctly Mary's. It is her grace that has attracted God's attention. That gives a whole new meaning to "amazing grace" doesn't it?! But what is grace? What does it mean that Mary was "full of grace?" Does it mean she was meek and mild, quiet, passive, submissive and always agreeable?

That's not the picture that Luke paints for us. No. In last Sunday's passage young, unwed Mary, receives the news that she will bear a son and she responds, not in fear and trembling, but with a hymn of praise, or sometimes we refer to it by its Latin name, *The Magnificat*, which means "My soul magnifies thee." And as Pastor Phil indicated in his message last week, there is nothing traditionally meek or mild about Mary's response to the angel's news. It is, as he titled his message last week, *A Song of Subversion* that Mary sings as she visits her cousin and shares the news of a child to be born.

"...the mighty one has done great things for me...he has shown strength with his arm...he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought the powerful down from their thrones and lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty. He has come to the aid of his servant Israel..."

This isn't simple "meek and mild," it's a manifesto, delivered by an empowered woman, in the home of an official temple priest, no less, and in Mary's manifesto there is evidence of deep thought, strong conviction, and considerable political savvy. This young, unwed mother-to-be responds to an angel's message with a bold proclamation of her own. "Hail Mary, full of grace!"

On Christmas Eve we heard Luke's description of the baby's birth. He tells us that near the end of her pregnancy, Mary makes the journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem, she gives birth in a barn, she lies down next to animals, and then, in the middle of the night, after having given birth, she welcomes worn and weathered shepherds, she welcomes strangers. "Hail Mary, full of grace!"

In today's passage, Luke tells us of the now 12 year-old who gets separated from his parents and the rest of their clan. After a trip to Jerusalem for the celebration of Passover, the clan has started to make their way back home and they have already traveled a full day's journey when Mary and Joseph realize that Jesus isn't with the group. So of course, the anxious parents turn around and make their way back to the city to search for their son. We can imagine their panic at the realization that Jesus is missing, but their anxiety was magnified even beyond that initial panic, because scripture tells us it took them three days to find their son, and Luke says, "When his parents saw him they were astonished." Other than that we don't know what Joseph said or did when he laid eyes on the boy, but we read this morning that "...his mother said to him, 'Child, why have you treated us like this? Look, your father and I have been searching for you in great anxiety.'"

Any parent who's ever temporarily lost a child knows that this isn't the stuff of traditional "meek and mild." This is an anxious Jewish mother dealing with a pre-teen son who's starting to stretch his wings, and make decisions of his own. But it seems that his parents aren't aware that their son is an almost-ready-to-be-young-adult so Mary makes it very clear to her son that she and Joseph were upset, and Luke makes it clear that young Jesus heard and understood his mother's message because the passage goes on to say,



“Jesus went down to Nazareth with them and was obedient to them.” He may not have verbalized it, but when he became aware of his mother’s distress, Jesus’ behavior, his obedience to his mother says it for him: “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

So let’s not make the mistake of thinking that Mary being “full of grace” is synonymous with our traditional understandings of being “meek and mild.” Mary, like all of us, is much more complex than we often give her credit. Luke helps us to see more of who Mary is: a bold woman, full of courage and conviction. He shows us a woman whose faith is so deep and so profound that she opens her mind and heart and even her body to imagining, receiving, and then sharing God’s presence in new ways. “Hail Mary, full of grace.”

Luke helps us to understand the long tradition of reverence for Mary, but I think the other scripture lesson this morning can help too. The angel Gabriel greeted Mary, then Paul greeted the early church, and as their descendants, now greets us as “God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved...” Gabriel recognized Mary as “full of grace” and Paul invites us to be people of grace. He invites us: “clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience.” Oh, but there’s that word meek! So maybe being “full of grace” does have something to do with “meekness.”

Over the generations, we have added some unhelpful connotations to our understandings of meekness and those connotations often lead us to assume that being meek means being wimpy and easily dominated. But traditional biblical understandings of meekness had much more to do with all those other qualities listed by Paul. To be meek was to be gentle, to endure with patience and without resentment, and to reject violence. Those qualities are consistent with the other qualities listed by Paul and consistent with the rest of his invitation to “...bear with one another...to forgive each other...and above all, clothe yourselves with love...” So it was for Mary: full of grace, clothed in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness (in the very best sense), patience, and above all, love. Can it be so for us?

Here we are, two days after Christmas, most of us having completed our family celebrations of gift giving, but scripture reminds us once again about both the gift and that which holds the gift. We’re reminded today, that we’re a lot like Joseph and Mary, making our way back from our festival times to our everyday lives. It is possible that, as we step away from this special season, like Joseph and Mary, we’ll get caught up in the busy-ness of our journey and we’ll lose track of who and what is most important to us.

But here’s the good news for Mary and Joseph and for us. Jesus was there ready to receive his parents when they returned to him, and there’s no reason to believe he won’t be there for us too, ready to receive us, to transform our expectations and cause us to be amazed just as he did his parents and those who observed him in the temple.

And perhaps, if we respond to Paul’s invitation, clothing ourselves in compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, patience, and above all, love, we can become like Mary. Perhaps our hearts and minds and even our bodies could hold, or become the wrappings for the True Gift of Christmas, the Gift that like Mary, we ponder and treasure in our hearts.

Meister Eckhart, a 13<sup>th</sup> century mystic once said, “We are all called to be mothers of God – for God is always waiting to be born.” So this morning, as we begin to move out of our Christmas celebrations and toward a New Year, we are invited to open our hearts that our lives might envelop and then carry the Gift of Christmas with us wherever we go. Let us join our Catholic friends, let us join the angel Gabriel, and let us join God in proclaiming, “Hail Mary, full of grace.” May the Christmas celebrations we’ve shared make us more like you. Amen.