

**Not Passing a Hail Mary**  
**Don Lincoln**  
**Luke 1: 24-25; 39-45**

They lived in the small development of starter homes in the first outer ring suburb of Cincinnati known as North College Hill. Their names were Bob and Maryann True. Along with what would eventually be their brood of six boys and one girl, Bob and Maryann lived in their modest, home across the street from my folks, Don and Carolyn Lincoln.

Of the same generation as my mom and dad – born around the Great Depression – Bob and Maryann were the parents of my very best, and closest friend, Timmy True. The Lincolns were members of the Northminster Presbyterian Church. The Trues were members of the St. Margaret Mary Roman Catholic parish.

Both sets of parents had grown up in a time when Protestants and Catholics had a healthy, unhealthy suspicion of one another. Those folks from that “questionable” side of Christianity; didn’t matter which side you were on – the other one was questionable. Raised in a culture that taught religious people to keep to their own – (we Protestants even broke it down to Lutherans, Methodists and Episcopalians) – with that big Protestant/Catholic divide you didn’t mingle too closely with folks from across the theological aisle – lest you catch something; or your faith be diluted. Somehow what you believed was going to get watered down or infected. Something was going to happen to it and you couldn’t be inoculated for that, so you just didn’t mingle too closely. It was another tradition that was less faithful, or less biblical, or less true. Whatever less it was, somehow we’d been trained to believe was the case.

But somewhere along the way (at 7022 Clovernoll Drive; I still remember that address like it was yesterday. I only lived there 11 years), that theological divide was crossed.

I grew up knowing my folks had a personal relationship with Jesus Christ and that was something their generation was trained to believe Catholics didn’t have. My guess is it was the same going the other way. But to their surprise – Bob and Maryann had personal relationships with the same Jesus – they loved the SAME Jesus. These two households – whose traditions taught that the other were not real kinsfolk – realized they were cousins in the faith – family – embraced, loved, and saved by the very same God they had both come to know personally in Jesus Christ.

Thanks be to God, because otherwise Timmy True and I would have had to sneak out at night to climb trees together, hunt for crawdads in the creek, ride our bikes, and race our push-go-carts down the hill of our neighborhood.

Interestingly, the first time I ever heard these words from Elizabeth in our text this morning, was not in my own Sunday School or from the pulpit at Northminster. I first heard these words of Elizabeth at some point at the home of my best friend – as he and his family recited them. “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”

Of course, there were a few words of introduction “Hail Mary, full of grace the Lord is with thee.” And some additional words that followed. But there they were – the words of Scripture – the words of Elizabeth – spoken by Catholics, that are in MY bible.

All the Roman Catholics or former Roman Catholics in the room, say them with me:

*“Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners, now and at the hour of our death. Amen.”*

(LONG PAUSE) I’m waiting. Just to make sure lightning doesn’t strike. My guess is there aren’t too many Presbyterian Churches reciting the “Hail Mary” this morning!

Now – I could have a good theological discussion about some of the additional language – in particular the invitation for Mary to pray for us – although if you were going to ask somebody, Mary’s probably not a bad one to start with.

Now, if any of you Protestants grew up around Roman Catholics, like me you probably considered the “Hail Mary” as some sort of punishment. A recited prayer, to be said a number of times as penance for some sin a good catholic had described in confession. And as such, we often belittled our Catholic friends for having to say so many “Hail Mary’s” and “Our Fathers.”

As an aside – how in the world did such a glorious salutation to the mother of Jesus ever become the nickname for a last ditch, last second, throw-it-to-the-end-zone-pass in football? My fear is, if you asked, more than half the nation would describe a Hail Mary as a pass into the end zone.

Many of us didn’t realize it wasn’t a form of punishment. Those of you who had to say it might have felt like it was. But I wouldn’t put it on par with a spanking, or getting your mouth washed out with soap, or the present-day favorite, a “time out” where you are supposed to ponder your infraction, but in actuality, get to

stew in your anger, or try to find something you could do while seated in the corner, without getting caught?

Punishment or not, the “Hail Mary” was Scripture recitation. “Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb.”

It’s been decades since much of the church abandoned memorizing bible passages. I don’t know why. I guess it happened about the same time we went to the open classroom and stopped diagramming sentences. But I still remember my first memory verse: “For God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son, that whosoever believes in Him should not perish, but have everlasting life.”

My guess is – my HOPE is – that if one day dementia sets in, or Alzheimer’s gets hold, there will be one thing still on my lips at my last breath, “For God so loved the world.” Because that is burned into me. Not as a punishment, but as a joyful affirmation.

“Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with thee. Blessed art thou among women, and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.”

Elizabeth is celebrating what God is doing!

The fact is, as you and I lean into this advent season, wandering through the characters of John the Baptist, Zechariah, Elizabeth, Mary, do you know what we will find in their words? Memory verses. Songs sung, proclamations made, pronouncements declared that are filled with words of Scripture.

Like so many Jews of their time, these are individuals who soaked themselves in the psalms and prophetic writings which spoke of mercy, hope, fulfillment, reversal, victory over evil, and of God coming to the rescue at last.

John, quoting the prophet Isaiah: “Prepare a highway in the wilderness;” Zechariah quoting the Psalmist “For He has lifted up for us a mighty savior;” Elizabeth saying “Blessed are you among women;” a text from the book of Judges. And next week we’ll hear the words of Mary’s song as she quotes Hannah from First Samuel, “My heart exults in the LORD, who raises up the poor from the dust.”

All that Scripture poured into their songs like a fountain overflowing.

Mary and Elizabeth shared a dream; a dream of ancient Israel that has been long carried and remembered and memorized since their earliest days: a dream that one day all that the prophets had said would come true. One day Israel’s God would do what He had said He would.

This is an exciting time. They are both pregnant. We're not sure how Elizabeth feels about it. We know she is quite old and it has to be an interesting time for her to say the least. And Mary's pregnant a little earlier than anticipated. But it's not the pregnancies they celebrate. It's GOD! GOD!! It's this celebration that God is taking the initiative, that God is doing now what God said He would do. He's breaking into the world.<sup>1</sup>

And then, Elizabeth celebrates a faithfulness in Mary. A faithfulness that comes from deep within. "Blessed is she who believed that there would be a fulfillment of what was spoken to her by the Lord."

Blessed are you, Mary, for your faithfulness, for your obedience, for your listening to God's word and believing it would come to pass. And why does it happen? Because Mary is steeped in the traditions. She lives in this word and that is why she is able to respond. She is rooted.

I love the rich tradition. Because I don't know a Catholic – practicing, or semi-lapsed, or lapsed who in a time of crises or despair or fear will not have words at their lips to say, without even having to find them: "Hail Mary, full of grace the Lord is with thee." "Blessed are thou O Lord." They are rooted in this scripture text that remembers God is able.

Where are you rooted? Where am I rooted? What are the words that come? What are the words that will be the last words on your lips if you have little else you can say; little else that comes to mind? Will it be those rich powerful words...?

From a heart rooted in the words and the ways of God. Where are you and I rooted?

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want, He maketh me to lie down in green pastures?"

"Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name?"

Praise God from whom all blessings flow, praise Him all creatures here below?

Glory be to the Father, and to the Son?

We say those words every single Sunday and we stand up. When I was a kid, they'd say, "O those Catholics, they stand up, sing these words nobody knows, they sit down" – we do the same thing!! It's a different collection of words, we stand up at different times, but they are rituals that infect our very being and they become things we can say and sing and pray without even thinking.

That is our hope with Ella and Mason (babies baptized this morning). That they will learn words early on, and those words will hold them, comfort them, challenge them. This is one of the reasons I think we love Christmas so much – most of us know all the words to all the songs!! They become part of us.

That's our job – to continue to learn and sing those words and be ourselves steeped in them.

One of my favorite legendary stories about Karl Barth: Karl Barth was one of the premiere theologians of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. A German theologian who taught in this country for a number of years. Karl Barth was known to be a man of more than a few words. He wrote the Church Dogmatics, which is 39 THICK volumes – one guy, all those words! The story goes he was invited to give a lecture to a group of theologians/preachers. Someone gave a lengthy introduction about his wonderful stellar education and Barth gets up to speak, looks out at the crowd, and says, "Jesus loves me this I know; for the Bible tells me so." And then the great theologian sat down.

"Blessed are thou among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb."  
"The Lord is my shepherd."

"God so loved the world He gave His only Son."

If you don't have a scripture verse that you can remember like that, find one. Ask one of the pastors, talk to one of the Sunday school teachers or Sue Spotts, our Director of Education. Find a verse to start the day with, give thanks to the Lord and bless His name. Steep yourself in the text because then you will realize God's promises are sure, God's promises are true and they will by chance be fulfilled even in you, even in me.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

1. NT Wright, Luke for Everyone.

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