Don’t tell my Pentecostal mom, but I pray the Hail Mary

My Grandma Violet was the black sheep of our family. I think of her when I pray.

by Samuel Thomas Martin in the December 1, 2021 issue

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Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you. Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death.

Don’t tell my Pentecostal mom, but I often pray this prayer. I click the beads on the olive wood rosary I keep in my pocket, bought at a Franciscan retreat center in the hills outside San Francisco. Franciscans can be tricky that way. And by *tricky* I mean *welcoming*. Like the prayer itself. Like how I imagine Mary, her old eyes rheumy as my Grandma Violet’s, her cigarette voice raspy as she says the kettle just went and why don’t I make us a cup of tea.

The way I imagine Mary makes me less nervous than the prayer itself. I’ve only ever whispered it in secret. Until now, of course. But I’ve spent a long time wondering why it means so much to me, and why I am reaching for it again this dark winter.

Hail Mary . . .

The prayer's first half—the more ancient part—pairs two greetings to Mary that appear in the Gospel of Luke. The first is from Gabriel, the messenger of the Lord, who comes into Mary's house in Nazareth and says, "Rejoice!"—translated *hail* from the Latin. "Rejoice, highly favored one, the Lord is with you; blessed are you among women." The second greeting is from Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit—a Holy Spirit, according to David Bentley Hart—who, upon hearing Mary's *hello*, cries out to her cousin, "Blessed are you, Mary, among women and blessed is the fruit of your womb."

I think of the look on Mary's face at Gabriel's annunciation—her thinking, *Rejoice? Are you serious?*—and I recall the crochet hook of Grandma Violet's glare when her sister Marcy tried to save her soul for the umpteenth time at her own kitchen table, me on Grandma's couch praying God would use Great Aunt Marcy to save Grandma from the hell I knew was smoking from the tip of her lit cigarette.

Come on! I remember praying like only a fervent Pentecostal can pray. *Come on, Grandma. I can't do eternity if you're not there. Just listen to Aunt Marcy. Please!*

The prayers of a hell-frightened kid. I still remember the empty feeling in my chest, the dull ache of thinking my grandma lost to God. I realize now that this fear was some dark shadow of a love I didn't yet understand. Now when I say this prayer I think of my Grandma Violet, and when I think of my Grandma Violet I hear the mother of God speak. A shriek of summer wind off the lake, Grandma's wet laugh when I'd walk through the door and say hello. *Hail, Mary.*

. . . full of grace . . .

The word κεχαριτωμένη, translated *full of grace*, admits multiple translations. Hart renders Gabriel's greeting as, "Hail, favored one, the Lord is with you." In other words: *Mary, you are the Lord's favored one, full of grace—you have been shown grace; grace has been gifted to you.*

But what is this grace? I get the need for grace far more than I actually understand what grace is. During the pandemic, I lost my job as a university professor. In the middle of a tenuous immigration process. With a wife set to deliver our fourth child. What is grace in a season that was blunt as Cain's rock raised against his Black brother's skull, sharp as Saul's sword on which the tormented king fell?

What is God’s grace in the face of despair—despair stark as the clinical depression that last autumn stole the son of dear friends by way of suicide?

“The Lord is with you,” Gabriel says to Mary.

The Lord is with me, eh? I imagine her thinking, skeptical as Grandma Violet hearing her brother Garnett preach.

I wonder how Mary would have heard this proclamation. She was young—some guess 14—and Jewish, cousin of Elizabeth, whose husband was a priest in the hill country of Judea. She may have been a weaver in the temple, according to Rowan Williams, weaving what would become the great veil that separated the Holy Place from the Holy of Holies.

A religious girl, then, whose songbook would have been the Psalms. She likely would’ve sung, in some way, Psalm 80, an Advent psalm for us, in which the refrain “Show the light of your countenance” is repeated three times. *Do this*, she would’ve sung three times to God. *Show me your favor and I shall be saved*. The refrain echoes Daniel 9:17 and is drawn from the Torah, from the book of Numbers. It’s the heart of the benediction we’ve all likely heard in one church or another:

> The Lord bless and keep you;
> The Lord make his face to shine upon you;
> The Lord lift up his countenance upon you,
> And give you peace.

The refrain is always invoked when God is being asked to restore Israel, God’s people, after they have gone astray. I can imagine my way into this text. I can imagine finding work. I can imagine the end of the pandemic. But what about my friends’ son, lost to suicide? For my friends, is there such a thing as restoration this side of the resurrection?

Mary knew the loss of a child, and though her grief is not my friends’ grief, I think they, like Mary, understand better than most of us what it feels like to be utterly gutted—to have grief like a blunt, rusted shiv puncture your heart.

Robert Alter’s translation of Psalm 80 prays, “O God, bring us back, / and light up Your face that we may be rescued. / Lord, God of armies, / how long will you smolder against Your people’s prayer?”

Hail Mary, full of grace. Or, rejoice Mary, you favored one, God is with you.

Upon hearing this greeting, Mary "was greatly distressed." Utterly terrified. *Are you really coming back to us—to me—to restore us? Even after all this loss? Even after all the lives lost to disease, taken by despair? Lord God of armies, bring us back, as the psalmist cries. Light up your face, that we may be rescued!*

I imagine Mary's inner voice quavering as Grandma Violet's did when she'd take a shot of nitroglycerin to stop the pain in her chest—her thoughts stuttering with hardly believed-in hope.

. . . the Lord is with you.

Yes, but how? she may have wanted to ask. *I am afraid of his anger, his wrath—*

"Do not be afraid," she's told. She will bear a son who will be called "the son of the Most High . . . and of his kingdom there will be no end."

A son? You know I'm a virgin, right?

I wonder if angels blush. I wonder if Mary's incredulous I-may-be-fourteen-but-I-know-how-babies-are-made stare made Gabriel a bit uncomfortable. I wonder if he was a bit snippy when he said, "Nothing is impossible with God!"

But some things seem so, don't they? Some losses seem to cut deeper than even the hell-puncturing promise of the resurrection. Some losses leave us begging for answers that don't come. In response to our many questions all we hear in the story is the idiotic repetition of Gabriel—that angelic broken record stuck on repeat—saying, *Blessed are you . . . blessed are you . . . blessed are you.*

Blessed are you among women . . .

But what would that have meant in the first century? William Countryman writes that the most a woman in Mary's time and place could hope to enjoy was a "secondary role in whatever household she belonged to." And in fact, "her position could be worse than just secondary . . . many found themselves in various grades of slavery, while even those who had achieved the status of wife might lose it through . . . widowhood" or divorce, the latter of which the Torah permitted, but only when enacted by a family's patriarch, its male head.

So, at the time of this story, to be blessed among women might not mean much more than to be blessed among slaves, the favored of slaves. In Hart's translation of Luke, Mary, in her response to Gabriel, says of herself, "See: the slave of the Lord; may it happen to me as you have said." Later Mary sings, "My spirit rejoices in God my savior, [because] he looked upon the low estate of his slave."

Does he know what this will cost me? Mary might have wondered. *If I say yes, if I'm found to be pregnant, and not by Joseph, I'll lose my job at the temple. I won't rise to the status of wife, not even to the half-pittance post of a carpenter's wife. I'll remain property in my father's house. A slave. And what will be done to me there given the disgrace this will bring?*

The virginity of Mary is important to Matthew's Gospel, Countryman argues, not for reasons of purity—that would be a later theological development—but because Mary's virginity highlights Jesus' separation from his father Joseph's household. Mary being separated from Joseph's family is akin to the separation required of Jesus' disciples. I think my Grandma Violet, a divorced woman in a small religious community where divorce was taboo, would have found this fact about Mary interesting.

"Leave your families behind" is a constant refrain in both Matthew and Luke, Gospels in which Jesus comes off as anti-family and by extension anti-religious. Jesus seems at every turn to subvert the nuclear family's importance, a fact that would've scandalized Aunt Marcy and made Grandma Violet cackle at the shock on her sister's face. Instead of focusing on the family, Jesus consistently showed favor to societal dirtbags, such as the sick and the poor, who would not be permitted to share in the table fellowship of an observant Jewish household. He also ate and drank with tax collectors, hucksters, frauds, and prostitutes. Jesus' ministry, as witnessed in the Gospels, seems to despise much of what his own pharisaical tradition valued and to value much of what that religious tradition treated as disposable.

My grandmother felt disposable. She feared not being visited by her family. She feared being alone—the unrepentant black sheep of the family—which is why she always kept the television on so it would sound like there were people in the room with her. That's why she looked so relieved when I'd walk through the door.

Blessed are you among women, Grandma.

Since God is love, I like to think of God loving us when we love each other. But I'm a mystic, given to charismatic thrills and chills. I'm not sure Grandma Violet was. Was my smile enough to show her—to make her feel—the favor of a God who loved her as much as I did, a God who came into the world through the body of a woman like her?

God did not come to us as the Lord of armies or a warring messiah. Not in the nagging evangelizing of holy rollers like my Aunt Marcy or Uncle Garnett. And not in one born of Joseph. God came in scandal, cut off from a holy lineage. A new kind of holy making holy all those discarded as unholy, disposable, refuse, shit. A shit disturber, then, and of the first order. A king of fools and miscreants, a comforter of the heartsick and the outcast.

And those who've cast themselves out? What about them? Those who through suicide end their own lives? Are they too made holy by this Jesus, this so-called king of glory? Who is this Lord God almighty who seems to hate the mores and motives of God-fearing people—the taboos we've razor-wired around certain lives, around certain kinds of death?

This Messiah—this God with us—upsets that well-ordered world even before being born into it. And so we hallow the birth that hallows all births, all lives, all deaths.

That's what it means to say—

. . . blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus.

Luke's Gospel highlights how hard it is for Joseph to get what God is doing. Countryman writes that "to participate in God's work, Joseph [had to] sacrifice the ordinary expectations of a male head of household." Meaning, Mary would not be his wife, and her son would not be his son but God's.

In saying, "Yes, I will take Mary as my wife," Joseph is saying, *Instead of lord of my own household, as is my right by the law, I will become a slave to this slave woman's child, a mere cog in his coming kingdom. I, who should've been first, am now last. Is this what the coming of the Lord will look like for me—the death of what small hope I ever held under the rule of foreign tyrants?*

What could he then say to Mary, his wife? Might he have said something as anarchic, as unthinkable for a first-century man as *Holy Mary, mother of God, pray for me, a*

sinner—

. . . now and at the hour of our death.

Do we understand how subversive it must have been for Joseph to submit to Mary, to her account of what God was doing in and through her?

It's as if God, through Gabriel, made this deal with Joseph: *Sacrifice your reputation to keep her alive, and she might be able to keep me—the Lord of armies—alive.*

Can we imagine God saying that to Joseph?

Joseph, like Mary, would've known the Psalms, would have believed—or at least desperately hoped—that the Lord of armies would come again to ransom captive Israel, that this Lord's face would no longer smolder with faint heat but flame up with righteous fury, like the blazing desert sun, like shining from shook foil, rattled sabers, lofted spears.

Such poetry we make to keep crushed souls alive.

Tell me there will be justice and I will tell you what that justice should look like. It should look like God baring God's holy arm, scattering the proud in the thoughts of their hearts, pulling down the powerful from their thrones and presidential mansions, their high and rounded offices. But we don't see this happening. We wait, and we wait, and we wait.

When will the lowly be lifted up? When will the old be remembered? When will the hungry be filled with good things? When will the jobless be given gainful employment and affordable health care? When will the brokenhearted be held in a way that helps them feel again the love of those who just do not know what to say in the face of scalding loss?

Maybe it all begins by exiling our best selves, abdicating those scraps of privilege and propriety to which we cling—like Joseph to his Davidic lineage, his purportedly God-given status as lord of his own observant household. Some of us may have to make ourselves nothing so that God can make of our nothing something. Some of us are Josephs.

But some of us are Marys. Some of us have been made nothing by the world. By well-meaning men in suits. By damning day-in and day-out dehumanizations of

sexism and racism and phobias too many to count. By pestilence and plague, persis tent evangelization and a global pandemic. By old age.

And this: by the gutting loss of a child who's taken their own life.

In so many ways we are made nothing. Worms in dust, dust itself. Nothing.

And so it is to you who have been made nothing—to all you many Marys, you hell-frightened kids and bereaved parents—that I write to say, beyond hope, that God has come as your Emmanuel. God with us—with all of us, but with you especially. For it is through you, mothers of God, that God comes again and again, loss after loss, into this world. Neither you nor those you've lost will be forgotten.

Such promises seem thin as the bruised, IV-punctured onionskin of my Grandma Violet's shaking hand the day she last touched me. But sometimes these promises are all we have to hold. So we cling to them, to these poetic, hard-to-believe *maybes* —these Bronze Age promises that all our many tears are caught in God's bottle, written as if by blood in a book that will be read aloud like some long-lost law on that final and glorious day of our Lord: on a day sure to come when the dark and disordered way of this world—the drab and diseased way things are—will be rolled back as a scroll and everyone, every last one, will call you blessed.

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