

# Hail Mary

The Rev. Dr. Peter  
G. James

Luke 1:46-56

Sermon Series:  
Songs of the Messiah

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mother, would  
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The year is 2021. The setting is England. The last children to be born, called Omegas, are now 25-years-old. A plague of infertility has ravaged the world. The chilling result is clear: no more babies and no future.

A charismatic leader named Xan appoints himself Warden of England. It's not hard to pull off, since people have lost interest in politics. Who will be able to stand up to such a tyrant?

A dissident group, called the Five Fishes, invites an unsuspecting candidate to join their cause. Theo Faron is a quiet, unassuming professor recruited to press his cousin Xan to institute democratic reform and restore respect for human life. When Xan learns that one member of the dissident group, a young woman named Julian, has become pregnant under unforeseen circumstances, he seeks her yet unborn child for political ends. Theo and Julian must now flee the country and live as fugitives. While on the run, Julian gives birth to a son in a deserted barn. You'll have to read the book to see how it all turns out, but the Christian symbolism is unmistakable. Theo resembles Joseph in the

way he protects Julian. Julian could be Mary's double. Together they take enormous risks to flee from the malevolent men in power. The whole setting reminds us of the world's darkness and despair into which Christ was born.

Author P.D. James is a Christian now in her 90s. *Children of Men*, which is her 20<sup>th</sup> mystery novel, offers a new twist on this improbable nativity story.

If you were casting someone in the role of Jesus' mother, would you have chosen Mary? You might have chosen a royal princess or the high priest's daughter, but you wouldn't have picked Mary.

Mary is a young peasant girl when God recruits her for the role; no more than 16. She resides in a town so insignificant that it goes unmentioned in the Old Testament. She is engaged to Joseph; nobody special.

When the angel discloses her remarkable destiny, Mary breaks forth into song. It's called the *Magnificat*, the first word in the Latin Vulgate. Mary begins by reflecting on her personal circumstances. "My soul magnifies the Lord and my soul rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked with

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favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed” (1:47-48).

Catholics will recognize this last verse as part of the Hail Mary prayer, “Hail Mary, full of grace. The Lord is with you. Blessed art thou, among women and blessed is the fruit of thy womb, Jesus.” This Hail Mary prayer is intended to be recited ten times in quick succession as part of a prayer discipline called the rosary. The beads in the rosary serve as a convenient way to keep track of the number of Hail Mary’s prayed.

In a 1975 NFL playoff game, a legendary quarterback named Roger Staubach threw a 50-yard desperation pass that was caught by Drew Pearson to win the game for the Dallas Cowboys. Afterwards, Staubach said, “I just closed my eyes and said a Hail Mary.” His quote imbedded the phrase “Hail Mary Pass” deep into our football lexicon. In our secular culture, I suspect more people know the meaning of a Hail Mary Pass than a Hail Mary Prayer.

The second part of Mary’s song, verses 50-56, is corporate in nature. By utilizing a poetic technique called antithetic parallelism, in which the first portion of the couplet is contrasted with second part, Mary illustrates the upside down nature of God’s rule. Verse 52—“He has brought down the powerful from their thrones,

and lifted up the lowly,” and verse 53—“He has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty.” In this coming kingdom, power grabbers will be marginalized while the lowly will be exalted.

Mary appears so confident God will do what he has promised that she speaks in aorist tense, indicating indefinite past. Mary speaks of the Messiah’s coming as an already accomplished fact, whose benefits will continue well into the indefinite future. “He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud... He has brought down the powerful... he has lifted the lowly... he has filled the hungry with good things... he has sent the rich away empty... he has helped his servant Israel” (1:51-54).

Where does this young peasant girl get this much insight? She demonstrates a remarkable grasp of Scripture, referencing 11 different Old Testament books within a ten-verse song. Who is this woman that Catholics revere and Protestants ignore?

The church council, which convened in Ephesus in 431 AD, identified Mary with the word “theotokos” meaning God-bearer. Since God-bearer is an awkward phrase, Catholic tradition began to refer to her as the “Mother of God.” In her role as Mother of God, Catholics came to regard Mary as sinless. This is known as the doctrine of Immaculate Con-

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ception, which was officially adopted by the Catholic Church in 1854.

I can't find anywhere in Scripture where Mary is represented as sinless. Just the same, she is worthy of our respect and admiration. Take her response to the angel who announces her implausible destiny. "Let it be with me according to your Word" (1:38).

When Mary is presented with the unbelievable news of her pregnancy, she asks, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" (1:35). I'm struck by the almost casual way her far-fetched pregnancy is described. God will make it happen.

People ask whether I really believe in the Virgin Birth. Look, if God can give sight to the blind and raise the dead, surely God can place the seed of new life within Mary. Gabriel provides the perfect apologetic for this miraculous birth: "Nothing will be impossible with God" (1:37).

Mary's faith is impressive; so is her joy. She begins, "My soul magnifies the Lord and my soul rejoices in God my Savior." Joy is all over this song. When Mary stops by to visit Aunt Elizabeth, her baby in utero leaps for joy. Everyone is so joyful—Elizabeth rejoices; Mary magnifies.

What makes Christianity so attractive in the first century is the joy that radiates from early Christians. Why, then, are so many Christians today grumpy,

stiff, unapproachable, grim-faced and positively joyless? Helmut Thielicke once observed, "The glum, sour faces of many Christians...they give the impression that, instead of coming to the Father's joyful banquet, they have just come from the Sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now they are sorry they can't get them back again."

Sheldon Vanuken was a doctoral student with his wife, Davy, at Oxford University in England following WWII. They prided themselves in being intellectuals and scoffed at Christian people. All of that changed when they became friends with winsome believers who caused them to reconsider and embrace Christ.

They returned to the states so Sheldon could begin teaching at Lynchburg College. Shortly thereafter, Davy died from a mysterious virus. Her death sparked a lengthy correspondence with C.S. Lewis, who was also about to lose his wife prematurely in death.

In his autobiography, *A Severe Mercy*, Sheldon includes a quote from his journal before he came to faith in Christ, "The best argument for Christianity is Christians: their joy, their certainty, their completeness. But the strongest argument against Christianity is also Christians—when they are somber and joyless, when they are self-righteous and smug in complacent consecration, when

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they are narrow and repressive, than Christianity dies a thousand deaths.”

God’s call in Mary’s life makes me think long and hard about the people God uses. God does some of his best work among ordinary people. Here, in our story, everything is turned upside down. Peasant people become royalty while the meek inherit the earth.

I came to faith in Jesus Christ as a college student. For many people, college is a time of falling away from faith; my experience was just the reverse. I began to ask big questions of identity and purpose in college. Although I had been raised with church, somehow the message never got inside of me. I thought religious people were drab and joyless.

When I began to entertain Christ’s offer of new life, I came across a short essay that peaked my curiosity. Later, I discovered it to be an excerpt from a sermon Dr. James Allen Francis preached in 1926. It’s entitled One Solitary Life:

“He was born in an obscure village, the child of a peasant woman. He grew up in another obscure village where he worked in a carpenter shop until he was 30 and then for three years was an itinerant preacher.

“He never wrote a book, he never held an office, he never went to college, he never visited a big city. He never traveled more than 200 miles from the place where he was

born. He did none of the things usually associated with greatness. He had no credentials but himself.

“He was only 33 when the tide of popular opinion turned against him. His friends ran away. One denied him. Another betrayed him. He was turned over to his enemies. He went through the mockery of a trial. He was nailed to a cross between two thieves. While dying, his executioners gambled for his clothing, his only property on earth. After his death, he was laid in a borrowed grave through the pity of a friend.

“Nineteen centuries have come and gone and today Jesus is the central figure of the human race and the leader of the column of progress. I am far within the mark when I say that all the armies that have ever marched, all the navies that have ever sailed, all the parliaments that have ever sat, all the kings that ever reigned, put together, have not affected the life of mankind on earth as powerfully as this one solitary life.”

I’m inviting you today to follow Jesus Christ with your life. This may be the first time you’ve heard this call to follow him or the hundredth time. I invite you to receive Jesus Christ as your Savior for sin and follow him as Lord of your life. Believe him and trust him. Love him and follow him.