

The Fourth Sunday in Advent, December 20, 2020

Pastor Peter Gregory, Our Savior Lutheran Church, Westminister, Massachusetts

Shown God's Favor

Luke 1:26–38

Grace, mercy, and peace to you, dear favored ones of God, for the Lord who was with Mary is also with you.

Luke 1:28

The Word of God is the announcement to the Virgin Mary by the angel Gabriel that she would conceive and bear the Son of God, especially these words of greeting from the angle to Mary: **“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you”** (v 28).

Some greetings mean trouble, like when my mom would use my middle name (“Peter Francis,” she would say), or when your boss tells you to “have a seat,” or when the teacher says, “I’d like to talk to you for a minute.” In a different setting or spoken by someone else, we wouldn’t find these same words troubling. When my wife used my middle name during our wedding vows, it was delightful. It all depends on who says it, when, and where. We know immediately that some greetings mean bad news—our sin has found us out or some terrible tragedy has taken place. So it’s no surprise that the Virgin Mary **was greatly troubled** when the angel Gabriel spoke to her and as she **tried to understand what sort of greeting this might be** (v 28). What had God’s messenger said that shook her up so badly? Only this: **“Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!”** (1:27).

1.

Those words might not seem like trouble to us, but they did to Mary. Having grown up with the Old Testament Scriptures, she knew that angels were rarely seen and only in the most extraordinary circumstances. Though they could bring good news, more often angels brought judgment for sin and unbelief. So when Mary saw Gabriel, what ran through her head? Did she remember the cherubim with flaming swords that guarded the way to Eden (Gen 3:24) or the angel of death that took the lives of the Egyptian firstborn (Ex 12:29) or the stories of angels striking down tens of thousands in Israel (2 Sam 24:16) and in the camp of the Assyrians (2 Kgs 19:35)? It was one thing for her to be near the holy God through the temple sacrifices He ordained; it was something quite different to be addressed personally by His messenger in her own village apart from the sacrificial blood. As it is written, **“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God”** (Heb 10:31).

But Gabriel’s words were encouraging. He greeted her with kindness, called her “favored one,” said that the Lord was “with her,” on her side. But that didn’t make sense. What could God want with her? Why would she be singled out? After all, she was just a young teenage woman, unmarried, and a virgin. When Sarah and Hannah had been visited by angels long ago, they were both barren women, married to important men, and up there in age. Each was told that the Lord would grant them a child linked to the promised Messiah. Mary didn’t fit that pattern. She seemed the furthest thing from being favored by God. She was dirt poor and from Nazareth. Everyone knows what people say about that place: “**Can anything good come out of Nazareth?**” (Jn 1:46). No, she was certainly not favored by God. Her life proved that. Could the angel be mistaken? Perhaps someone else was meant? I wonder if she glanced over her shoulder expecting to find another person standing there.

2.

Mary was unworthy of this divine favor and she knew it. She didn’t deserve this greeting. She hadn’t done anything to earn it. Like everyone descended from Adam and Eve, she too was conceived and born in sin (Ps 51:5). Sinful parents mean sinful children, and she was no exception. The same is true of us. Even if we’re religious people, even if we lead halfway decent lives, we and our children are all born sinful and unclean. We deserve nothing from God except punishment and wrath. No wonder Mary quaked when she heard the angel! Maybe she thought something like this, “Would the Lord really greet me with kindness? What about my sin? Is it possible that I should receive divine favor? How can I, in the midst of poverty, sickness, and death, be blessed by God? What would move the Lord to be with me in mercy rather than judgment?” Though she felt lowly and despised, though she knew her own unworthiness, still the angel’s words were most definitely addressed to her: “**Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God**” (v 30). “Favor with God” — that was the second time he’d said that. Was she surprised? You better believe it! And you should be, too, for

YOU ALSO ARE GOD’S FAVORED ONE
THROUGH THE SON CONCEIVED AND BORN OF THE VIRGIN MARY.

3.

The angel’s greeting wasn’t followed by divine punishment for sin or by some terrible tragedy. The Lord’s favor rested on Mary, and this is what it meant for her: “**Behold, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you shall call His name Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. And the Lord God will give to him the throne of His father David, and He will reign over the house of Jacob**

forever, and of His kingdom there will be no end” (vv 31–33). The special favor she received was that she would be a mother—the mother of God. Her Son wouldn’t just play a supporting role in the coming of the promised Messiah. He would, in fact, be the lead actor in the divine drama of salvation: the Messiah Himself. The fulfillment of every promise would be in her womb for nine months. Did she marvel at each hiccup and kick? Was she concerned about stretch marks? Did she experience discomfort and difficulty in sleeping as she carried this child? We see here what great honor the Lord bestows on pregnancy, how highly he views motherhood, and how valuable every human life is from the moment of conception.

4.

What the angel announced to Mary that day was good news for all people. The favor of God would extend far beyond the child’s mother. This Son would be given the name “Jesus” to show what He would do: He would save His people from their sins (Mt 1:21). And He would sit forever on the throne of David, His father, to rule over an eternal, boundless kingdom. Jesus is both the Son of Mary and the Son of the Most High; both descendant of David and David’s Lord; true God and also true man in one person. The question—Mary’s question—is: How could this be? A virgin birth is a contradiction. It defies everything we know about human biology and reproduction. But Gabriel announced the unthinkable, the miraculous, what could only be divine: **“The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy—the Son of God”** (v 35).

Here was a child conceived not in the normal way but miraculously by the Holy Spirit. This humanly-impossible virgin birth, defying reason and nature, was entirely the work of God. As the Spirit of God hovering over the waters in the beginning brought about the whole creation and the first man (Gen 1:2), so the Spirit of God hovering over Mary would bring forth a new creation and a new humanity in her child. Being the Son of God, Jesus was a second Adam born without the stain of original sin. Of all people, He alone truly found favor with God (Lk 2:40, 52), for He alone was sinless and holy. As God’s favored one, Jesus came to **proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor** for us all (Lk 4:19). He secured favor for all people in the sweet swap that took place on the cross. The sinless man bore our sin. The second Adam substituted for the first Adam and His descendants. The eternal One died. The favored One was rejected by God, crying out, **“My God, my God, why have You forsaken Me?”** (Mk 15:34).

5.

God’s favor is a free gift in Jesus Christ. It’s not earned by what we do. It’s the very same thing as God’s grace. We don’t deserve it, but it’s shown to us because of Jesus’

sacrifice on the cross. The same goes for the favor shown to Mary. The angel addressed her as “favored one” on account of her highly-favored Son. She was highly favored because of the blood her Son would shed on the cross as a sacrifice for sin. For that reason, no Christian should view Mary as one who gives favor with God but simply as one who receives and enjoys that gracious favor. The impossible word spoken to Mary was not only that she, a virgin, would give birth to a Son but also that she, a sinner, found favor in the eyes of God. And for that, she depended on her Son. In her Magnificat, Mary called Him **“God my Savior”** (Lk 1:47). And so she receives Gabriel’s message in faith, saying, **“Behold, I am the servant of the Lord; let it be to me according to your word”** (Lk 1:38).

Brothers and sisters in Christ, you are each another Mary, for you also have God’s favor through her Son. I know, you’re probably wanting to look over your shoulder because you assume I’m talking about someone else. I mean you. From that one miraculous conception and the Son’s bloody death comes divine favor for all people and for you. You don’t deserve it. I don’t deserve it, but God give it to us as a gift. He has forgiven your sins for Christ’s sake. He doesn’t hold them against you. You aren’t being punished for your sin. No terrible tragedy has come upon you. This Gospel is a beautiful greeting, for it brings the good news that you are highly favored by God and that the Lord is with you. It gives you a new birth through Jesus Christ into His eternal kingdom. What joy is yours, dear Christian, as you live in this preaching, in your baptism, in the holy communion of our Lord’s body and blood. Though the devil, the world, and your flesh wish to rob you of this word and the confidence of God’s favor, the Lord sends His messenger and His gifts to reassure you of it. So, like Gabriel, I declare to you again today: In Jesus Christ, conceived by the Holy Ghost of the Virgin Mary, you are God’s favored one; the Lord is with you; and His face shines upon you. Amen.

The peace that passes all understanding guard your hearts and minds through Christ Jesus.

Phil 4:7

*Revised from a sermon preached for Fourth Sunday in Advent (Series B) on December 18, 2011
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