



Good Shepherd Lutheran Church & School

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FOURTH SUNDAY OF ADVENT

December 21, 2014

“Favored One”

(Luke 1:26-29)

Rev. David K. Groth

“In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent from God to a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a virgin betrothed to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. And the virgin’s name was Mary. And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you!’ But she was greatly troubled at the saying, and tried to discern what sort of greeting this might be” (Luke 1:26-29).

Collect of the Day

Stir up Your power, O Lord, and come and help us by Your might, that the sins which weigh us down may be quickly lifted by Your grace and mercy; for You live and reign with the Father and the Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever.

Amen

My older brothers like to think that as the youngest child, I was spoiled. I didn't have to work like they did. I got to stay out later and watch movies rated PG earlier than they did. I got to drive a better car in high school.

I see it all very differently. As babies Andy was treated like porcelain, Paul like corning ware, and I, I was treated like Tupperware. We have all kinds of pictures of Andy as an infant, and quite a few of Paul too, and I think the hospital provided one of me.

Sometimes, when the topic comes up, I'll reverse course and say, "You know, I was the favored one, wasn't I?" That's when the emails come back fast and furious. Or I'll send an e-mail to mom and copy them into it thanking her for those 500 shares of Apple stock she gave me at Thanksgiving. (Of course, she didn't do that. I just like to stir things up with the brothers.)

What was it about Mary that made her the "favored one"? Of all the potential candidates, what was it about Mary that the Lord chose to use her to be the Mother of our Lord? Why Mary?

In a poem, Ann Weems seems to be asking the same question.

Mary,

Nazareth girl:

What did you know of ethereal beings
with messages from God?

What did you know of men

When you found yourself with child?

What did you know of babies,

You, barely out of childhood yourself?

God-chosen Girl:

What did you know of God
that brought you to this stable
blessed among women?

Why Mary? I love Frederick Buechner's description of the moment: "[Mary] struck the Angel Gabriel as hardly old enough to have a child at all, let alone this child, but he'd been entrusted with a message [to give] and he gave it . . . He told her what the child was to be named, and who he was to be, and something about the mystery that was to come upon her. 'You mustn't be afraid, Mary,' he said. As he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great golden wings, he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now, on the answer of a girl" (*Peculiar Treasures*, p. 44).

Why Mary? Why not another? Why did *she* find favor in the eyes of the Lord?

Others also found favor in God's sight. In Genesis 6, quote "Noah found favor in the eyes of the LORD" (v. 8) in contrast to the wickedness of the rest of mankind. In Exodus 33 Moses, was favored by the Lord (v.12). Abraham was favored by God, David too (Acts 7:46). And now, here in Luke, it is Mary who is the "favored one." What is it that these people have in common? Was it that they were so good and righteous? I don't think so. Noah drank. Abraham worshipped other gods. Moses had anger management issues. David was an adulterer, liar and murderer. And though some insist Mary was without sin, we don't subscribe to that because it's not in Scripture. Mary herself responded to Gabriel by saying "my spirit rejoices in God my Savior." If Mary was without sin, then from what did she need saving? Romans 3 says, "None is righteous, no, not one . . . All have turned aside . . . no one does good, not even one" (vs.11-12).

Of all those in Scripture that found favor in God's eyes, not one of them was said to be without sin. There must be something else going on.

At the Men's breakfast/Bible Study last month, it came clear. To be favored in God's eyes happens when God has mercy on us. I looked up the word favor as it's used in the Hebrew and Greek, and sure enough the word itself is very much related to the idea of grace, which is God's generous mercy toward undeserving people. Titus 3, "He saved us, not because of righteous things we had done, but because of his mercy" (v. 5). For example, Noah found favor in God's sight, and yet after the flood, God promises, "I will never again curse the ground because of man, *though the intention of man's heart is evil from his youth*" (Gen. 8:21). That would include Noah and his family, right, because they're the only ones left. The intention of Noah's heart must also have been evil. Mary was God's favored one not because she was chalk full of natural born virtue. Mary was the favored one because God had mercy on her and was prepping her for this role.

When something really bad happens to us, we often ask "Why me?" Sometimes when something really good happens to us we also ask, "Why me?" Mary too was wondering. As soon as she heard the angel Gabriel say, "Greetings, O favored one, the Lord is with you." Her first response is, of course, fear for the trauma of being confronted by an angel. But the text says she also "wondered what kind of greeting this might be." Why am I favored? Why was I chosen for this? The angel explains a little who Jesus will be, and a few verses later Mary herself says, "From now on all generations will call me blessed." She didn't point to any inner attributes. She pointed to the One who blessed her. She knew her favored status was given, not won. It was a blessing of God, not a result of her own works. "From now on all generations will call me blessed."

Are you favored by God? Are you baptized? Did God put his name on you in baptism and wash you clean of your sins and adopt you as his own child? If that's not being favored by God, I don't know what could be! Do you ever get to hear his Word which has the power to bring the light

of Christ into the darkness of our hearts, to ignite faith and keep faith alive? Again, that's another sign of God's favor. Did Jesus also die for you, to redeem you from sin and death? Are you also loved of God? Does he feed you, clothe you, give you shelter, and family and friends? Does Jesus put his body and blood into your mouth for the forgiveness of your sins? What more could he possibly do for us to show he has favor on us?

I suspect God must find it absolutely remarkable that as soon as things start going wrong for us, we start wondering whether or not he loves us. We start wondering whether we've fallen out of his favor. Maybe it was something we did, or said.

That's the way things can happen at school. We can fall out of the teacher's favor for not performing well on a test. At work, we can fall out of the boss's favor for not taking initiative, not living up to expectations, or taking too much sick time. We can even fall out of favor with family members, when we do or say something hurtful, or fail to hold up our end of the household chores. You and I fall out of favor with others all the time. And with some, it feels like you're always balanced perilously on their fulcrum. They're watching you, weighing your words, evaluating your performance, and judging you. You're either teetering this way or tottering the other, and it's all based on your performance.

Not so with the Lord. He's not so fickle! He never backs out of his baptismal promises. He loves you unconditionally. And once we realize that, it is life changing. When God favors you, he loves you, not always because you're so loveable, but because of his mercy and grace. Nothing you do or say can earn that love. Therefore it's not so easy to fall out of God's favor! Possible? Sure, if you turn your back on him, but he will not so easily turn his back on you.

If you're in my 8th grade confirmation class, you should do the assigned memory work. But I'm here to tell you God will still love you even if you don't. I'm also here

to tell you might not be confirmed . . . but God will still love you.

God's love for you is stronger than any disappointing test of your skills in school or at work. The things you forget, misplace, or mishandle are not bigger than the steadfast love of God, for you have found favor in his eyes. God's favor for you is stronger than your sin. God's favor for you is stronger than your death.

To be favored of God is no small thing. It is a big deal, a blessing that will not fade or wither or fall away. His favor was there when he formed you in the womb. His favor for you was there on the cross. His favor for you is here in the Word, and the Water and the Wine.

Because he favors you he has prepared for you what Peter calls "an inheritance that is imperishable, undefiled, and unfading, kept in heaven for you, who by God's power are being guarded for a salvation ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Pet. 1:3-5).

To be favored of God is to be blessed of God. Mary knew it and confessed the same. "All generations will call me blessed" she said. And God has also favored you, in a different way than Mary for sure. But he favors you. You have not been left out, or overlooked. You are baptized. He has enkindled faith in you. He puts his Word into your ears and his body and blood into your mouth for the forgiveness of sins. He loves you and nothing can separate you from that love in Jesus. Amen.

