

FAVORED BY GOD

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(The Annunciation passage from Luke was done as a dramatic presentation prior to this sermon.)

One thing that happens when I take the time to memorize a passage like I did for the Annunciation today is I spend more time than usual on just simply working on the words. The other thing that happens is that I develop a very clear mental picture of the scene. I Goggled Annunciation and came up with literally thousands of images. I chose then to use certain gestures and postures based on how I saw this scene unfolding.

What prompted my particular portrayal was the greeting of Gabriel to Mary. Did you notice that The angel greets her and calls her favored one and says the Lord is with you. Mary is perplexed and wonders what kind of greeting this is. Most of us would be perplexed if we were greeted this way.

In the Catholic tradition Mary is revered, considered without sin by some. She is part of a hierarchy of great figures in the church and is more venerated than any other person with the exception of Jesus. In the Protestant tradition though she is one of the priesthood of all believers and that makes her just another person like any of us. So think for a moment what Gabriel means when he says, "Greetings favored one," and "You have found favor with God."

So one question is how would you react to a greeting like this? Mary's reaction is to be perplexed and wonder what sort of greeting this was. What would it mean to you be told you were favored by God? Forget the angel for a minute and think about what it would mean to you to consider yourself favored by God. Because guess what, you are, not only are you favored by God, but the Lord is with you. We say that every Sunday at the Peace don't we, but it feels more like saying hello. What if we took a moment to consider what it means to say the Lord be with you?

So many of us think of Mary in an exalted position and she is, but that doesn't exclude any of us from being favored. Maybe what makes Mary so unique is that she answers the angel with the words, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word." Have you ever wondered if Mary was the first who was visited by Gabriel? Or is she now famous and revered because she was the one who said yes?

Some thoughts from Richard Rohr might be very helpful here. This was in one of his daily meditations during Advent:

Of all the books in the New Testament, the Gospel According to Luke gives the fullest account of Mary both as mother of Jesus and as symbol of humanity.

She is revealed in Luke as a real mother, completely human. No plaster statue or

artist's Madonna, she is a Jewish girl who grows to womanhood in the company of a son who is as much a mystery to her as a child can be, and perhaps lost her husband early, since Joseph disappears from the text. That's very real, as any mother or widow today can also testify.

Yet Mary is a woman of extraordinary faith, which is what sets her apart and makes her a model for the rest of us. Even though she does not fully understand what God is asking of her, she believes with all her heart that it can and will be done, and she acts accordingly. Amazing that we turned faith around to mean having answers for everything. Mary did not seem to have answers for anything. She just "held all these things in her heart" ([Luke 2:19, 51](#)) until they eventually revealed their meaning.

This is a very different definition of faith and one that I find very helpful. This is not a faith that requires all the answers before moving forward into that leap of faith. This is a faith that above all else trusts God. This is a faith that says God is in charge not me. I find that very reassuring right now in a turbulent world.

Martin Smith gave a lecture many years ago where he talked about being a co-creator with God. He speaks of allowing God to be a partner in our lives and having the faith to allow God to take the lead. Mary is just such a Co Creator with God. God is all powerful, but for this act he needs a real person. For the kingdom to come on earth God needs real people. God needs, real people, ordinary people who are extraordinary enough to have the faith to make room for God in their lives. People who are willing to take the risk to say, let it be so with me. People who are willing to be surprised by God.

So I have given you much to think about and now I want to give you a structure for that contemplation between now and Christmas. Yes I want you to take a few moments from the craziness of prepping for Christmas and meditate on the message of the season.

MEDITATION ON THE ANNUNCIATION

So get comfortable and close your eyes. Place yourself there with Mary. Where are you? Inside in a room, out in a field, in the yard of the home where Mary and Joseph live? Take a moment to build a clear picture in your mind of where you are. Is it night or day? Feel the air around you notice the light around you.

In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin's name was Mary.

What does Gabriel look like? How do the two face each other. Is one sitting and the other standing, both sitting, both standing?

And he came to her and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you." But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. What is the expression on Mary's face, her body posture?

The angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God. And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him 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 ancestor David. He will reign over the house of Jacob forever, and of his kingdom there will be no end." Mary said to the angel, "How can this be, since I am a virgin?" The angel said to her, "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 holy; he will be called Son of God. And now, your relative Elizabeth in her old age has also conceived a son; and this is the sixth month for her who was said to be barren. For nothing will be impossible with God." Then Mary said, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Then the angel turns and looks at you. Gabriel says, "And I have great news for you as well. You too are favored by God. You too have been chosen by God for a very special role. Do you know what it is? Do you want to know? What do you think it might be? Will you respond just as Mary did "let it be with me according to my word? Sit with Gabriel for a few moments. What do you want to say to him?"

Now come back here to St. Aidan's. I would encourage you to take 20 minutes or so and do this meditation. Take the time and engage Gabriel in conversation. Ask him what is on your heart and see what he has to say.

I want to close with a favorite prayer of mine by Thomas Merton. I think he sums up the enormity of what Mary was faced with and what we are faced with as the favored of God. Let us pray:

My Lord God,

I have no idea where I am going.
I do not see the road ahead of me.
I cannot know for certain where it will end.
Nor do I really know myself, and the fact that
I think that I am following your will
does not mean that I am actually doing so.
But I believe that the desire to please you
does in fact please you.
And I hope I have that desire
in all that I am doing.
I hope that I will never do anything
apart from that desire.
And I know that if I do this
you will lead me by the right road
though I may know nothing about it.

Therefore will I trust you always
though I may seem to be lost
and in the shadow of death.

I will not fear,
for you are ever with me,
and you will never leave me
to face my perils alone.

Thomas Merton