

Advent 4  
December 18, 2011  
Christ the King  
Kenner, LA

***The Favor of God***

Text: Luke 1:26-38

Imagine being told, by an angel no less, “you have found favor with God. The Lord is with you.”

But first let’s back up a bit. The Gospel Reading today is somewhat out of place. Although it surely alerts us that Advent is winding down and Christmas is just a week away, this account of Gabriel’s visit to Mary was the reading throughout the Church nine months ago. Because if we celebrate our Lord’s birth on December 25<sup>th</sup>, then the Annunciation (which is what Gabriel’s visit and message to Mary is officially called), is commemorated every year exactly nine months earlier, on March 25<sup>th</sup>.

Well, that’s just a bit of liturgical history. The more important point is that Gabriel is announcing the upcoming birth of the Christ. This is phenomenal news. Because the Israelites had been waiting for the Messiah, the promised Christ, for at least a thousand years, and now the good news was there were only nine months to go. (Just imagine if after waiting now 2000 years for Christ’s return, we were to learn that it would happen in just nine months).

Except that nobody else knew this yet. Only Mary. And she receives this news in a highly personal way. After Gabriel says she’s going to give birth to a son and will name him Jesus, he elaborates on God’s great plan of salvation. “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.” You can tell that Gabriel is caught up in the grandeur of it all.

Yet Mary’s first response isn’t. “How wonderful. The promised Messiah is finally coming, God’s plan of salvation is heading to its completion.” No, none of that, at least not just yet. Instead, her first response is, “what are you talking about. That’s impossible. Haven’t you heard, I’m a virgin.” It’s only after Gabriel has gone into some of the details that she humbly says, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word.” She receives this news in a very personal way.

So let’s get more personal ourselves. Imagine an angel appearing to you (that’s hard enough, I know, but that’s not the important part). Imagine an angel telling you, “Greetings, favored one!” And then following that up by saying, “Do not be afraid. . . for you have found favor with God.”

What would that feel like to be told that you “have found favor with God”? “Who me?,” I’d say. “That’s impossible. Haven’t you heard I’m a sinner?” But with God, nothing is impossible, even us.

On Christmas we’ll reflect upon God’s favor shown to Mary and Joseph, and how angels favored shepherds with their appearance and song. On Epiphany we’ll celebrate how God favored wise men from the

East with a star leading them to the newborn king. These are all familiar people upon whom God bestows his favor.

But we also want his favor too, don't we. Young and old, rich or poor, whatever our circumstances in life, who wouldn't want the favor of God?

What a thrill it would be then, but how unsettling also, if we were to hear God or a messenger of his tell us, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is with you. . . Do not be afraid, for you have found favor with God."

"Who me?" we'd ask, just like Mary. "I'm not anyone special and I haven't done anything to deserve this."

Exactly! And that's the Gospel. The Good News is that we too have found favor with God and that the Lord is with us as well, even though we don't deserve it either.

After all, God didn't choose Mary because she had done something to merit his favor; rather, she was favored by his choosing her to be the mother of the Savior.

God always surprises the lowly and unassuming by weaving them, unsuspecting, into his plans. Like old Abraham and barren Sarah whom he chose to make a great nation. Or like the tongue-tied murderer and refugee Moses whom he selected to lead his people out of bondage. Or like little David, the runt of Jesse's family, whom Samuel anointed as the future king. Or later, like the rough but simple fishermen and tax collector and the other nobodies whom Jesus singled out as disciples and who ended up turning the world upside down with their message.

Throughout Scripture God favors people by including them in his plans, even over their initial objections, like Mary's question, "How can this be?" But when Gabriel reminds her that nothing is impossible for God, she demurely says, "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word."

Dear friends, you too are favored by God, whether you've known it or not. How do I know? Because the word "favor" in the original Greek is the same word we translate as "grace." To be favored by God is to experience his grace. And that's what Jesus is all about, God's grace in human flesh. St. John says "we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth."

As personal as the Annunciation was, Mary realized this wasn't all about her. This is about all of us. And that's reflected in her song of praise, the Magnificat, "My soul magnifies the Lord. . . for you Lord have looked with favor" (there's that word again) "on your lowly servant. From this day all generations will call me blessed" (why, because she was so pure and holy? No, because, as she says) "you, the Almighty have done great things for me."

But then she expresses how God has favored and done great things for all of us in sending his Son, how God was keeping his promise of mercy, "the promise made to our forebears, to Abraham and his children forever."

At a deanery meeting this week, Pastor Patrick Keen pointed out, “notice how Gabriel only told her the good news. He didn’t tell her at what great cost it would come, or the pain it would involve for her. That her son would suffer and die for the sins of the world, so that all of us would experience God’s grace, God’s favor. She’d learn that part soon enough.

Finally this. We’re reminded at the end of our worship every week that we are blessed with God’s favor. It’s part of the benediction which God told Moses’ brother Aaron to speak over the people. And we’ve been doing that now for about 3300 years: “The Lord bless you and keep you. The Lord make his face shine on you and be gracious to you. The Lord look upon you with favor and give you peace.”

By the way, sometimes you’ll hear a pastor add the word, “may.” “May the Lord bless you and keep you.” It’s has a nice ring to it and sounds folksy enough, but it’s totally unscriptural. So don’t let any minister get by with it. Because this benediction comes with a command and a promise. God says, about the words he’s commanded Aaron and his descendents to use, “So shall they put my name upon the people and I will bless them” (Numbers 6:22-27). That’s the promise. Nothing “maybe” or “iffy” about it. “And I will bless them.” That’s his promise. You can count on it. But, of course, because of Christ, we already knew that.

