

The Church of the Pilgrimage
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Luke 1:26-56

In the sixth month of Elizabeth's pregnancy, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, a town in Galilee, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph, a descendant of David. The virgin's name was Mary. The angel went to her and said, "Greetings, you who are highly favored! The Lord is with you." Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be. But the angel said to her, "Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favor with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end." "How will this be," Mary asked the angel, "since I am a virgin?" The angel answered, "The Holy Spirit will come on you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you. So the holy one to be born will be called the Son of God. Even Elizabeth your relative is going to have a child in her old age, and she who was said to be unable to conceive is in her sixth month. For no word from God will ever fail." "I am the Lord's servant," Mary answered. "May your word to me be fulfilled." Then the angel left her. At that time Mary got ready and hurried to a town in the hill country of Judea, where she entered Zechariah's home and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the baby leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth was filled with the Holy Spirit. In a loud voice she exclaimed: "Blessed are you among women, and blessed is the child you will bear! But why am I so favored, that the mother of my Lord should come to me? As soon as the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the baby in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed is she who has believed that the Lord would fulfill his promises to her!" And Mary said: "My soul glorifies the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has been mindful of the humble state of his servant. From now on all generations will call me blessed, for the Mighty One has done great things for me—holy is his name. His mercy extends to those who fear him, from generation to generation. He has performed mighty deeds with his arm; he has scattered those who are proud in their inmost thoughts. He has brought down rulers from their thrones but has lifted up the humble. He has filled the hungry with good things but has sent the rich away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, remembering to be merciful to Abraham and his descendants forever, just as he promised our ancestors." Mary stayed with Elizabeth for about three months and then returned home.

Favored Ones

When you visit the church of the Visitation in the hill country of Israel you climb a hill that rises in the midst of a village, walking on stones carefully placed as stairs making their way to the church above. In a court yard outside the church itself Before you even enter in There is this statue of the two women, Elizabeth and Mary, greeting each other – the picture you see on your bulletin cover today.

It was one of my favorite holy sites, perhaps because I have always loved the scriptural story of the Visitation -- Elizabeth and Mary, two women coming together. One is old and her son will close an age, the other is young and her son will usher in the new. (*Interpretation, Luke, Fred Craddock, p. 29*)

The sky was clear blue the day of our visit, the air fresh and crisp, the energy inside and outside the church invigorating. I could imagine Mary climbing the hill, playing the angels news over and over in her head, wondering with each step why she was chosen. And what about that greeting? "Hail, O Favored One, God is with you!" the angel said.

But it's not so much going there to the holy site as it is a song that is driving this sermon. Last week the hymn that closed out our worship service last week was a song about Mary and the angel Gabriel. A hymn about the Annunciation, it had a repeat refrain "Most highly favored lady, Glo o o o or i-a"

It stuck in my mind, the ending of that song. All week it kept coming up, rattling around in my head. What does it mean for a person to be highly favored? What did it mean for Mary, and for that matter Elizabeth? And what might it mean for us?

Being favored of course has its issues. God, we think, is supposed to be fair. God isn't supposed to have favorites, the way parents or teachers aren't supposed to have favorites. There's a whole long story in the bible about a parent, Jacob, who forgot this and treated his son Joseph as so precious that Joseph got thrown into a pit by his brothers and later sold into slavery in Egypt. Things got really complicated when Jacob forgot that parents are supposed to be impartial and gave Joseph that oh so special robe. And parents these days...well we're getting into the weeks where parents will put purchased presents out on the bed, checking to make sure that little Johnnie isn't getting more than little Sarah, and little Sarah isn't getting more than little Max. Siblings do compare, you know. They do cast sidelong looks there under the tree.

So what does it mean to be favored in the sense that Jesus mother Mary was favored? If you look the word "favor" up in the dictionary you will find many possibilities:

Favor

Friendly regard shown toward another by a superior

Favor

Approving consideration or attention

Favor

An act of kindness

Favor

A small gift given out at a party.

Favor

To resemble. (for instance, she favors her mother)

What helped me this week was an article I read about Mary and the women of faith whose lives and stories would have influenced her. High on the list would have been Hannah, Samuel's mother. Hannah was old, like Sarah, like Elizabeth, and she prayed for a child. God granted her a child, Samuel, who would leave his home at a young

age to be in training to be a holy man. Scholars believe Mary's song, the Magnificat, was based on Hannah's song, sung at the time Hannah learned of *her* pregnancy. Some scholars, because of Elizabeth being older, like Hannah think she sung the Magnificat, but tradition has always said it's Mary, so that's what stuck.

High on the list of influential biblical women would also be Queen Esther, a heroine for the Jewish people. Esther was understood as favored, and the purpose of her favor was not so that she could enjoy all the benefits of being a queen, but rather to save the Jews from being killed off. God needed Esther in the position of Queen to accomplish God's purpose. If you know this story, you know that Mordecai, Esther's uncle encouraged her to speak up, to follow through on their plan to approach the king and demand justice for her people – to stop the decree that allowed Jews to be killed. Esther may have been young and lovely, but what was important was that she use her power, her voice. “For if you remain silent at this time” Mordecai says, “relief and deliverance will arise for the Jews from another place, but you and your father's house will perish. Yet who knows whether you have come to the kingdom for such a time as this?”

For such a time as this. In the bible, favor is not for personal enjoyment or benefit but rather for the benefit of God's work, the benefit of God's realm. Mary may have been good and kind, a faithful Jewish woman, but favor has more to do with God's concerns and ambitions finding human flesh to carry out that work than it has to do with our ambition or talent or general worthiness.

Yesterday I began a book that was recently recommended to me: The Children by David Halberstrom. David Halberstrom was a twenty five year old reporter for the Nashville Tennessean at the time of the civil rights movement and this, looking back now, is what he is writing about. Halberstrom knows how to write, and he pulls you right in with a prologue featuring Diane Nash, a young student at Fiske University and the inner dialogue she was having about going to engage in the first sit-in, February 13th 1960. I thought I knew a fair amount about the civil rights movement, but I had never heard of Diane Nash. She was young—a college student -- and people wanted her to be a leader – but inside, she just felt afraid. By the time of the second major sit in, she'd spoken, she'd been in the paper. People knew her face, and she had already escaped an angry mob. Would she show up for the second sit in? Her fear was real, but she too was favored, in that it seemed she was being called to just such a time as this.

So let's pause today and consider Mary, Mary who rushed to the hill country to be with Elizabeth, Mary whose heart was so full she burst into song. Let's consider that Mary, that bold Mary and notice that her song isn't much about her own being favored, only briefly does she touch upon that. Her song is about being part of something larger... it is about a reversal of fortunes, where those *whom the world favors* will exchange places with the powerless and the poor! Again *favor* is about taking part in God's work, “God's Project” as the people of Nicaragua would say.

We might also remember that being favored didn't mean Mary's life was about to get easy. She was young and pregnant, the circumstances were awkward and people could be cruel. Mary gave birth in a stable or cave, and shortly thereafter had to flee with her family to Egypt to protect Jesus from King Herod. She gave birth to a son who was to be put to death by the authorities. Being favored clearly isn't about being comfortable or safe.

We might pause too and think of the apostle Paul, and all the hardships he suffered. He was chased out of many towns, cursed, hated, imprisoned and eventually martyred for his faith. Yet he too was favored. God chose him, knocked him off his horse, turned his life around and gave him this work to do.

I once saw a wall plaque I liked a lot: It said *She knew that she was formed by God's hands Dreamed up in God's heart and placed in this world for a purpose*

It seems to me that this gets to the biblical notion of favored. Formed by God's hands, dreamed up in God's heart, and placed in this world for a purpose. And if it is true for Mary, that she was favored in that way, is that not also true for us? I know right now to many young people our world looks pretty nutty, Pretty messed up. I know it looks that way to a lot of older people too. But for what purpose have we been put in the world? This is the Mary and Elizabeth question, the being favored question for us too.

Favor is not about wealth, or fame or even protection, not when God speaks the word anyway. Favor means we have gotten God's notice because we are each of us created by God and loved by God and God has something for us to do. Favor means we can all claim and live out those things we say at each and every baptism: Child of God, Disciple of Christ, Member of the Church. Favor means we have work to do, goods to share, people to value and welcome, people to stand up for and over all of it love to empower us.

Favor means in spite of our human limitations our own sense of our own lack of power We, each one of us can be used, and used mightily by God

Most highly favored lady

Most highly favored people

Amen.