

## “Favored One”

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First Presbyterian Church of Kirkwood

Sunday, December 24, 2017

### Romans 16:25-27

*Now to God who is able to strengthen you according to my gospel and the proclamation of Jesus Christ, according to the revelation of the mystery that was kept secret for long ages but is now disclosed, and through the prophetic writings is made known to all the Gentiles, according to the command of the eternal God, to bring about the obedience of faith — to the only wise God, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory for ever! Amen.*

### Luke 1:26-38

*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. And he came to her and said, 'Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.' But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. The angel said to her; 'Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour 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 for ever; 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 departed from her.*

Let us pray. Gracious and loving God, we open our hearts, our minds, our imaginations, and our faith to You, and to the power of Your Holy Spirit. I pray that You will take the words and images that we carry within, the words we offer in song and in prayer, the words that we've heard proclaimed from the gospel, and the words that You've laid upon my heart this morning to share. Touch, bless, and transform all of these by the power and mystery of Your spirit so that what I say becomes the word of Christ. And that word, by the power of Your Spirit, does its work in our hearts, and in our minds, and in our lives. That we might become the people of God in deeper ways. That we might be hope, peace, love, and joy in this world. We ask this through Christ faithful name, Amen. The gospel reading from Luke is called The Annunciation, it is one of the most famous passages of all scripture and is depicted and talked about, not only in churches but in art, in history, theologians, philosophers, lots of different sort of representations of the angel Gabriel coming down and speaking with Mary. The words are important for us to think about and to hear. I've always, personally, loved this passage because, in the Ignatian tradition, we are invited to imagine ourselves as a character within the biblical story, and I've often felt or decided or whatever to be Mary in this passage, and to hear the angel Gabriel speak these words to me, "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, David, you have found favor with God, and now you will conceive in your womb, in your heart, in your soul, and you will bear the Christ, Jesus. He will be great. He will be called the son of the most high, and on, and on, and on it goes." And then, I ask the question that Mary asked, "But how can this be? I've got nothing. I'm a nobody. I haven't

done anything special, why would You pay attention to who I am and what I'm doing? And why would You single me out? And why would You say the Holy Spirit is going to come upon me, or come upon you and do this miraculous-- why? why?" Why indeed? People throughout the ages have asked, "Why Mary?" And in fact, why people? Why an incarnated God? Why does Jesus have to be born as a child, a human in order for us to be saved? Does God really depend upon us? Does God really depend upon Mary saying yes in order to save the entire world, creation, all of us? Why would God do that sort of thing? In the fourth century, the bishop of Alexandria and Egypt St. Athanasius said, "Today is the beginning of our salvation. The revelation of an eternal mystery, the son of God becomes the son of the virgin. As Gabriel announces the coming of grace, together with him, let us cry to the mother of God, 'Rejoice, you of full of grace, the Lord is with you.'"

As I've heard these words be invited to be addressed to myself through Ignatian spiritual practices, I want to invite you to think about being Gabriel as well, and [to?] think about someone in your life and addressing them, either verbally, but most importantly, sort of in your head, address them like Gabriel addresses Mary. Someone maybe who you're having a little bit of struggle with, "Greetings favored one, the Lord is with you. Do not be afraid, you've found favor with God." If you could look upon your loved one or your neighbor in that way. If you could speak those words either in your head or out loud to them, imagine what kind of relationship you would have, and imagine what kind of world you might build. Maybe we would have a world where peace, in fact, reigns supreme. As I said earlier, the theologians, philosophers have looked upon the Annunciation, but also artists, in fact, today, if you can, I think you can call it art, at 4:00 o'clock the children's pageant will be on full display up here, and there will be part of that where the angel Gabriel goes to Mary and says these amazing words to her. Not only in our church, but in churches around the country, and even around the world there will be putting embodied practices to this sacred text. Filling the hearts of millions of people, parents, and grandparents, and church members with just huge amount of joy, because this is a special time, and when we see this passage enacted through children, we get a different sort of sense of it, we realize the innocence and the pure joy, and some of the trepidation that comes from the angel's encounter with the mother of God.

One of the things that I did this week as I prepared to preach this morning was I spent some time looking at classic paintings of the Annunciation. So many great, great artists, Botticelli, Michaelangelo portrayed the Annunciation in a style that just captures you and sort of draws you in. Some of them seemed very realistic, and some of them you kind of wonder, "Was she really dressed so nicely, in very stately kind of robe, and with a cup of coffee or something sitting on a table because they portray it in their time?" One of the paintings though, was by a Spanish painter named Murillo, it's hanging in the Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, and it's a picture that if you can imagine a canvas, in the lower left is Gabriel kneeling, wings huge behind him outstretched, looking towards Mary. Lower right is Mary, eyes down, arms crossed in contemplation, she's dressed in fine red and blue robes. In front of her, kind of to the side is a table with the Bible opened. You can tell that Gabriel is really wanting to convince her and she's not quite sure. Right in the center above their heads is light coming from among some clouds and there is a dove that seems to be heading their way. And then, in the top half of the painting and even down into the middle and lower are angels, cherubs, little chubby children with wings, naked, lounging on clouds. But all of them paying attention, "What is she going to do? Is she going to say yes"?

The commentators upon this painting say that it portrays that moment where there's this space between everything that the angel is saying to Mary just before she says, "Here I am." There's that pregnant pause of wondering, will she say yes to this crazy invitation to become the mother of God? Or will she, like so many of us at times, say, "No, not now. You've got to be kidding, I can't do it." As I was thinking about this painting and looking at it and writing different notes that came to me, for some reason a recollection came back to me

of sitting during the choir trip to New York City, sitting in a theater watching a play. It was a production about Carol King's life. My wife and I happened to get tickets rather late, but luckily we were right on the cutoff. Kind of in that section back there where you've got lots of leg room. It was an amazing thing to watch as people came onto stage and off of stage changing clothes in an instant, scenes changing, people singing. It was magic. And I thought instead of kids pageant, what would it look like if, in the tradition of Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dream Coat of the old productions of First Pres' from decades ago, we put on the play, "The Annunciation". Would it be like Mario's painting where it was just Gabriel and Mary, a dove or some light in the middle, and then angels kind of up in the choir loft? I don't think so. If I got to write the play I would make sure that down here under the pulpit if Gabriel is there on his knees begging Mary telling her about all these things that God wants to do, I'd make sure there was a crowd down here. And I'd make sure that they were watching and wondering kind of what's going on? It would be a motley crew not unlike the shepherds that'll be here at 4:00 [laughter].

Sorry, shepherds [laughter]. Your sheep look, great by the way. The cotton has been replaced and it's fuzzy [laughter]. There'd be a crowd down here and they'd be looking. Because I think the most important aspect of this story about Mary and Gabriel is the part that the Gospel writer leaves completely out, which is us, the crowd, the audience, the observers. What Gabriel and Mary are talking about matters most, not for the cherubs or the angels, but it matters most for us, the crowd. Those that are sitting and watching and wondering, "Why is he telling her not to be afraid"? And that she's found favor with, "Oh, my gosh, did you hear that? He said that she's going to get pregnant and bear a son and they're going to call him Jesus. And that he's going to be great." I mean they're having all kinds of conversations as they watch. And as I thought about that I realized or what came to me again was a script of that part of the play. The part of the play where the angel says, "The holy spirit will have come upon you the power of the most high will envelop you in mystery, and the child to be born within you will be holy. He will be called the son of God. Even 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. Nothing will be impossible with God."

The crowd is going, "Yes. Nothing will be impossible with God." And just before Mary says her favorite lines of, "Here I am," the light would shift and instead of the spotlight, and instead of the spotlight being on Mary and Gabriel, the light would shift to the crowd. Gabriel would still have some illumination, but Mary would be in the dark as she weighs this almost impossible invitation that God is giving her. And then a young man in fine robes standing over here would speak up pleading, in a sense, with Mary, "Oh, blessed mother of our Lord Jesus Christ, your faithful 'yes', your 'here I am' is the conception of grace reclaiming all the world. You pondered perplexed and angry. What on earth is God up to now within you?" And from the dark, you would hear these words from her, "I am favored? God is with me? What on earth is God up to now? Do not be afraid? I have found favor? I will conceive in my womb? I will bear a son, call him Jesus, savior of all creation, son of the most high, the throne of David, the house of Jacob, a reign that will never end? Me? A nobody? A nothing? A virgin? I have found favor? God is with me? How can this be? Will the spirit of the Lord come upon me and wrap me in mystery? Will a child be born to me and be set apart, holy, the son of God?"

And then a woman who's been washing clothes in the crowd comes forward and speaks up. "Yes, dear Mary, you are favored by God. Yes, you will conceive and bear a son. Yes, you will name him Jesus. Yes, he will bring salvation and wholeness to us all. Oh, blessed mother, just please say yes. For just as Elizabeth is pregnant know deep within that nothing, absolutely nothing is impossible with God." And then an old beggar standing next to the young man in fine robes and the woman washing clothes speaks up. "Oh, blessed Mary, we hold our breath and wait wondering what will you say. Will you birth forth this child? Will you have a son and name him Jesus? Are you willing to allow the light to shine through you and bless us all who live in the

land of deepest darkness? Will you give us with your yes a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, an everlasting father, a prince of peace? Oh, blessed Mary, we are holding our breath and waiting for the promises of God made to all his people to be birthed forth in you. What do you say? What will you say to this holy invitation? Tell us, oh blessed Mary, will all of creation be made whole? Will we all be saved? What do you say?" And then coming back into the light Mary says, "Here I am, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word. Hear me, all of creation, I say yes. Yes to the glorious impossible. I say yes to the grace of God. All of who I am, my soul, my life, all of me says, 'Yes. Yes. Yes.' I, the lowliest of all servants, say yes." And then the woman washing clothes speaks, not to them, but turns to all of us and says, "So breathe deep, creation. Breathe again, all who sit in darkness. Breathe, you who are lowly and hungry and seemingly without hope. Breathe deep and rejoice for our blessed Mary said yes." Amen.