

Advent 4B December 20 2020

Luke 1:26-38,46-55

St Peter's Lutheran Church Elizabeth

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Grace and peace to you favoured Saints from God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, one God, now and forever. Amen.

The angel Gabriel came to Mary and said, *"Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you."* Let's pray:

One thing we pay particular attention to at this time of year is Jesus' mum, Mary. It's easy to admire Mary for her virginity and obedience, but I caution against turning Mary into some kind of golden calf. Sadly though, Catholics lay great claim to her, whereas we just dust her off once a year for the nativity scene and then quickly put her back before she embarrasses anyone. But I wonder if one of the wonderful advantages of following the church lectionary is that it presents Mary every December and January. She won't be ignored. So for today, the 4th Sunday of Advent, I thought I'd ask Mary, the mother of our Lord, the Queen of Heaven, the God-bearer, a few questions about our Gospel text.

*In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, (Hang on. That's like God sending an angel to Canberra. Isn't Nazareth kind of a nothing town?) 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."*

What kind of greeting is that Mary? Had you ever been called favoured before? Mary. They're all called Mary aren't they? Mary the sister of Lazarus, Mary from Magdala, that other Mary and Mary the mother of Jesus. So common a name. It's almost as though when the Gospel writers couldn't

remember a woman's name they just automatically called her Mary. So common – but now angelically declared “favoured”. So, when the angel called you favoured, did you look to see if someone else was standing behind you? Mary; common and favoured and from an insignificant place.

*The angel said to her, “Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God.”*

You found favour with God? Why? I mean, let's face it, Mary, we aren't given a resume of all the things you did that made you favourable. So, I've always wondered if it was the fact that you were chosen by God that made you favoured not that your favourableness made you choose-able. I mean, maybe you made yourself into a girl which God could favour because you listened to your youth rabbi and lived the right lifestyle. But if the way God seems to favour prostitutes and tax collectors and adulterous kings over the smug, righteous and powerful is any indication, then I think it's safe to assume that it's God's nature to look upon insignificant peasant girls with favour. Because God's just like that. At least that's how we see God consistently acting in the Bible. So, was your favourableness about God's nature or your nature or both? I've always wondered that.

*“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.”*

So, Mary, you are a marginalised, young, Jewish girl living in the midst of a land occupied by the Roman Empire and in your ears that night are the words “throne... reign... kingdom”. Did it feel like political, and religious insurrection for the common to be favoured and the favoured to be common and for an angel to speak of thrones and kingdoms to a young peasant? Did you feel the stirrings of revolution in your heart?

*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."*

What was that like for you, Mary? Hearing that you will conceive by the Holy Spirit and that your elderly aunt was also mysteriously visited in some way related to God. It's always been one of God's favourite stunts to pull off: violating our polite family values through his indiscreet fruitfulness. Willing life where there is no life. Making a way where there is no way. Messing with all of us in the way that only true mercy can do. Elizabeth barren and pregnant. Mary common and favoured.

*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.*

Here am I, you say. Send me. "Here am I, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word". So receptive. So accommodating. So beautiful. We try to domesticate you Mary, like a trinket of docile, submissive womanhood, but you are bolder than that, more defiant. Some try to hide from their calling (big name people like Moses, Jonah, Elisha) but you said Here am I. Sign me up. Did you know what this was going to mean for you, Mary?

*And Mary said, "My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour, for he has looked with favour on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;"*

So, Mary, what does being blessed look like? We usually use that word a bit differently. Like, you're so blessed to have that nice house. So, how exactly are you using that word, Mary? Did you feel blessed as your unwed belly grew under the gaze of disapproving onlookers? Did you feel blessed going into labour amongst sheep and straw? Mary, common and favoured and from a nothing town... Did you feel blessed when your heart sank realising you left your 12-year-old behind in Jerusalem? At his arrest did you feel blessed seeing rope dig into the wrists of both God made flesh and the flesh of your flesh? Did you feel blessed when they lifted him up? No one else was his mother. Just you, Mary. Blessed are you among women. Common and favoured. And blessed is the fruit of your womb, Jesus. God and Man. Maybe this is why Martin Luther said, "We hail Mary, Queen of Heaven, because in her we come to know that ours is the God who comes nearest to us in our brokenness."

*"for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty."*

Wow, Mary! There's nothing like a song about upturning the whole social order to warm the heart... or scare the daylights out of everyone. So maybe that's what God is up to here. Transgressing the boundaries of human society. Canberra becomes Jerusalem. The favoured become common and the common become favoured. The barren, pregnant. The hungry, filled. The rich, hungry. The proud, levelled and the downtrodden, lifted up until it's all blurred beyond distinction.

The prophet Mary hails the new upside-down reality of God's kingdom on earth and this is its fight song. It's your song, people of God, all of you. And also a song for all the other women whose children die at the hands of others. Mary sings of God's dream for us... she sings the song of this God who entered so fully into the muck of human existence and upturned our expectations and religiosity enough to usher in a new reality. And this reality is that God became one of us so that we might become children of God. Gregory of Nyssa writes, "What was achieved in the body of Mary will happen in the soul of everyone who receives the Word." You, all of you, are also blessed, favoured, and full of grace. So, may the God through whom nothing is impossible help you to be like Mary, carrying the gospel into this hurt and broken and beautiful world. May it be with you all according to God's Word. Amen.

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.