

Epworth Chapel on the Green
December 21, 2014
Fourth Sunday of Advent
Rev. Dr. Brook Thelander

2 Samuel 7:4, 8-16
Psalm 132:8-18
Romans 16:25-27
Luke 1:26-38

Our Gospel lesson this morning tells the story of the angel Gabriel's visit to a young teenage girl named Mary. Mary is regularly lifted up as a model of faith because of the role she plays as the mother of Jesus. And for good reason. One of the larger themes of Luke's Gospel is that the true mark of discipleship is *the willingness to trust in the promises of God*. And Mary certainly fits that category!

But I want you to notice something. Before Mary ever agrees to cooperate with God's plan; before Mary ever says "yes" to anything – she is *blessed*. Before she ever takes a leap of faith and says, "I am the Lord's servant and am willing to accept whatever he wants," she hears these words: "Greetings, favored woman! The Lord is with you!"

Yes, Mary believes God's promise. But what *is* it, exactly, that she believes? Yes, she believes Gabriel's announcement that she will bear God's Son into the world. But before she believes *that*, she believes something else. This young teenage girl, a "nobody" from a nondescript, "no count" town, believes that God *notices* her, that God *favors* her, that God *blesses* her.

Why is this important?

Well, because *blessing* is a powerful thing. It is powerful because it is somewhat rare. We live in a world that operates on the principle of reward and punishment. Whether it is at school, at work, or at home, *we are taught to expect others to give us only what we deserve.*

But blessing operates on a different logic. Blessing is never deserved, but always a gift. Blessing intrudes into and interrupts our normal “I get what I’ve got coming” world. **Blessing ultimately disrupts our *quid pro quo* world to announce that someone sees us as worthy and special apart from anything we have done.**

And because blessing is so rare, it is often very hard to accept it when it comes. Certainly this was true of Mary. The angel says to her: “Hail, favored one, the Lord is with thee!” And the text describes her response: “Confused and disturbed, Mary tried to think what the angel could mean.”

Mary is absolutely perplexed by the angel’s announcement that *she* is favored by God. “What have I done,” Mary wonders, “to merit God’s notice and favor?”

But that is precisely what *blessing* is – unmerited and undeserved regard and favor. It is pure grace. It is sheer gift.

But slowly the blessing begins to “sink in.” And as it does, Mary begins to open herself to the work of the Holy Spirit. She begins to open herself to the plan of God to use her to bless the whole world through her willingness to carry Jesus.

But before Mary ever says *yes*.....she is blessed.

Before Mary can love God, she must know that she is *loved* by God. And as this great story shows, ***before there is obedience, there is blessing***. Before a young teenage girl ever takes a single step toward God, she is loved, she is noticed, she is favored, she is blessed – not because of what she can bring to the table, but because God decided it to be so. And when this young girl understands this, the world begins to turn upside down.

This is all very well and good – for Mary. But what about us? What about the people we live with, the people we work with, the people we go to school with? What about us?

If I would have started the sermon this morning by saying: “Greetings, favored ones, the Lord is with you and plans to do great things through you!” I suspect that your response may have been very similar to that of Mary. Many of you might have said, “How can this be?”

Some of us have a difficult time believing that God even *notices* us, let alone favors us. Our lives can sometimes seem so ordinary, so mundane, so

boring, that we hardly feel they are worthy of God's *attention*, let alone God's *favor* and blessing.

I'm pretty sure that this is exactly how Mary felt on that ordinary, run-of-the-mill day so long ago. "Who am I, that God would *notice* me, let alone favor me?"

On this Fourth Sunday of Advent, may I attempt a possible answer to that question? *You are God's highly favored ones. You are loved and blessed by God, and in the midst of your ordinary, boring, mundane lives you are called to hear and believe and respond to God's blessing wherever you live and work and go to school.*

And if you think, "How can this be? Or how is this possible?" I answer by saying this: *The Holy Spirit is with you, and will guide you in all you say and do, so that you may be a blessing to your world.*

And here is the real challenge before each of us this morning. The issue before you this morning is *not* whether or not you are favored by God and blessed by Him. The real issue is how you respond.

As we come to the Lord's Table this morning, the bread and the wine are God's promise to you. In them God speaks to you and says: "You are my beloved, you are my highly favored one."

Come with faith. Receive that promise. Take hold of the blessing, unmerited and undeserved though it may be. And resolve in your heart to say: *Let it be so, according to your Word.*

On this darkest day of the year, let us open our hearts anew to the God of infinite possibilities. Then let us go forth in faith, waiting to greet the Light of the world as he is smuggled into our midst.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.