Luke 1:26-38

26 In the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God to a town in Galilee called Nazareth, 27to a virgin engaged to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David. The virgin’s name was Mary. 28And he came to her and said, ‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’ 29But she was much perplexed by his words and pondered what sort of greeting this might be. 30The angel said to her, ‘Do not be afraid, Mary, for you have found favour with God. 31And now, you will conceive in your womb and bear a son, and you will name him Jesus.32He 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. 33He will reign over the house of Jacob for ever, and of his kingdom there will be no end.’ 34Mary said to the angel, ‘How can this be, since I am a virgin?’35The 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. 36And 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. 37For nothing will be impossible with God.’ 38Then 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.

Luke 1:46b-55

And Mary said,
‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
   and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.
   Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed;
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.
He has helped his servant Israel,
   in remembrance of his mercy,
according to the promise he made to our ancestors,
   to Abraham and to his descendants for ever.’

Favored by God?

The Bible describes the reading that Beth just shared with us as the *Song of Mary*, which is often called *The Magnificat.* There is a saying that not all musicians believe in God, but all musicians believe in Bach. So much of our church music comes from this wonderfully inspired and inspiring composer.

I encourage you to see a clip of one performance of Bach’s *Magnificat* at ([**http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo1x-62WmrI**](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bo1x-62WmrI)).

The word *Magnificat* is Latin for *my soul magnifies,* the first words that Mary declares in her song. I like to imagine that the early church that first heard the Gospel of Luke might have actually sung this Song of Mary, perhaps not quite like Bach arranged it, but in a way that expressed the same passion, the same joy.

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
   and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.’

What a great beginning to this book that emphasized God’s favor upon the poor and the meek and the downtrodden.

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.

It is the Gospel of Luke where we find the story of the angel announcing to the poor, cold shepherds that “unto you is born this day a Savior.” The announcement didn’t come to the White House first or to the Kremlin. It came to the common person out working the night shift. And it was through Mary, a poor peasant girl, from a rural district, in an occupied land, that God would make his appearance in the flesh, to usher in His Kingdom in this world.

This is very encouraging news. I used to think of God as if he were a star, a sun, something too bright to look at directly and something too hot to handle or even come near. The Bible itself seemed to radiate so much that I could only gaze at the words briefly lest I be blinded by their radiance. And just as the words radiated, so did the many kings and prophets and disciples that I read about. Solomon was the great wise king. David, the hero warrior, Moses, the holy man leading God’s people, Peter, Jesus’ right-hand man, Paul, the bold evangelist. And Mary, the pure, the holy, the gently, a perfect mother. It was only after I put on my sunglasses and started reading the Bible a little more carefully that I began to see the humanity. All of them were human, with human traits, human vulnerabilities. Paul was an accomplice to murder (if not a murderer himself). Moses lost his temper on a few occasions. Elijah got so discouraged as a prophet that he wanted to quit, to lay down and die. Abraham was so afraid for his life that he disowned his wife and let her be taken by Pharaoh to be part of his harem. Yet through all of this, God just keeps on doing his work through these vulnerable, doubting, fearing, even treacherous people. It seems that God has pretty low standards, which is great news for me. It is perhaps the most encouraging thing that the Bible teaches us: God never leaves us. We can fail test after test, we can lie and cheat and betray and ignore and fight and scream, but God never leaves us. During the Advent season we celebrate God’s coming to stay with us, in Jesus, two thousand years ago and now in the Holy Spirit at some undisclosed time in the future, when he will come again in glory. He has chosen to live with us eternally. And so Mary sings:

‘My soul magnifies the Lord,
   and my spirit rejoices in God my Saviour,
for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant.’

Mary knows her own lowliness. She was human, too. In fact it’s her ‘lowliness’ that makes her wonder why God has looked with favor upon her. We see that in today’s text: the angel Gabriel comes to her and announces:

‘Greetings, favoured one! The Lord is with you.’

Her response: she’s perplexed*.* She’s thinking, “Who am I? A teenager. A girl, from the wrong part of town. I’m poor. I don’t have a college degree.” But Mary is favored nonetheless.

Writer, theologian, and pastor Walter Bruegemann said, "Few of our people (in our congregations) imagine God to be an active character in the story of their lives." We think that God has chosen a handful of people in human history through which he operates: Abraham, Moses, Esther, Ruth, David, Elijah, Mary, and Rebecca. The rest of us are left to just tell the stories of these heroes. But what makes you different from any of them? What makes your life any less important than theirs?

I’m going to go out on a limb here. Mary was visited by an angel. The word ‘angel’ comes from the Greek word “angelos” which literally means “messenger.” I don’t have wings, but in the sense of the Greek “angelos,” I’m going to be your angel this morning, and I want to give you the same two messages that the angel gave to Mary:

FIRST, YOU ARE FAVORED BY GOD. THERE IS NOTHING IN GOD’S EYES THAT DISTINGUISHES YOU FROM PAUL, OR FROM MARY, OR FROM JOSEPH OR JACOB OR MOSES OR ABRAHAM OR DAVID OR SOLOMON. You are neither better nor worse than any of these people, and you live under the same canopy of grace that everyone lives under.

SECOND, GOD WANTS TO ACCOMPLISH WONDERFUL THINGS THROUGH YOU. YOU HAVE A SPECIAL PURPOSE IN GOD’S SCHEME OF THINGS. God wants you to make a difference in this world. Your life may seem rather humdrum. You may not have any fancy title or pedigree. You may be just like Mary, a peasant girl from nowhere. Yet God has great plans for you.

I want you to think about these two facts: You are favored by God, and He wants to accomplish wonderful things through you. You may feel like Mary at first; confused, perplexed, and even troubled by the attention that God is giving to you. You may wish that He wasn’t giving you so much attention, but it’s too late: I’m the messenger, and I’ve already given you the message.

All that you can do is respond to it. You can respond with doubt thinking that nothing you do will make a difference, or you can respond with a faith which tells you that all things are possible, and that everything you do makes a difference. You can respond by denying that God would consider you such an important part of his plans, that God would favor you, or you can rejoice in the truth that He DOES favor you and has very special plans for you. Imagine for a moment, something you can do between now and Christmas, something you can do for someone, something you can say to someone, that would make a difference for someone.

I would you now to join in the responsive reading found in the bulletin, and to consent to God’s plan for you.

Pastor: Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you

 and intends to do great things through you.
People: **How can this be? We are ordinary, everyday people.**
Pastor: Yet you have found favor through God, and the Holy Spirit will come

 upon you, guide you, and work through you to care for this world and

 the people God loves so much. For nothing is impossible with God.
People: **Here am I, a servant of the Lord.**

 **Let it be with me according to your word.**

 Didn’t that feel good? I pray that you feel the same way that Mary felt upon giving her consent to God, letting it be with her, according to God’s word, that you would rejoice in song, that you would proclaim your own personal *Magnificat.* Let us pray.

Heavenly Father,

We can hardly believe that we find favor in your eyes, or that we would have an important part to play in your wonderful plans for this world. Let it be with us according to your word. Open our eyes to your perfect will, that we may see where we can make a difference. And guide our steps as we tread the narrow path that leads us into eternal life with you. In Jesus precious name we pray. Amen.