

Isaiah 11:1-6

- ¹A shoot shall come out from the stock of Jesse,
and a branch shall grow out of his roots.
²The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him,
the spirit of wisdom and understanding,
the spirit of counsel and might,
the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.
³His delight shall be in the fear of the Lord.

He shall not judge by what his eyes see,
or decide by what his ears hear;
⁴but with righteousness he shall judge the poor,
and decide with equity for the meek of the earth;
he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth,
and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.
⁵Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist,
and faithfulness the belt around his loins.

⁶The wolf shall live with the lamb,
the leopard shall lie down with the kid,
the calf and the lion and the fatling together,
and a little child shall lead them.

Luke 1:26-38

²⁶In 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, favored 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 favor 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 forever, 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.

Greetings, Favored Ones!

1. *Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.* Okay, granted I'm not the angel Gabriel, but I am somewhat of a messenger from God, which is what an angel is. So is it presumptuous of me to be telling you that God intends to do great things through *you*? Is it so far-fetched that God could tell you the same thing

that he told Mary? *Greetings, favored one. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.*

2. We think there's a great distance between us and the characters that we meet in the Bible, more than a thousand miles and two thousand years. What's more we think of those characters we meet in the Bible as somehow closer to God, either in time or in distance. They talk with God. They witness great miracles. Jacob even *wrestles* with God. That doesn't seem to be a part of our experience. Sure, we pray and we worship, we acknowledge God *exists*, but we don't converse with God like Abraham or Moses did, and we don't witness so many miracles, *do we?*
3. And perhaps it's because we don't hear God speaking to us, we don't have angels paying us unexpected visits that we begin to have doubts, doubts about God or doubts about ourselves. Doubts that God still works in this world the way he did for the Israelites, freeing them from slavery, leading them across a sea, defeating armies, healing the sick and raising the dead. Or, perhaps, doubts that people like you or me could be part of God's plan, agents of God in this world destined to "*do great things.*" Some people believe that the world has become so corrupted that God just doesn't bother with us anymore. People like Abraham and Moses and Mary were somehow special, different from us, closer to God and therefore chosen *by* God to do great things, *weren't they?*
4. This morning I would like to make **three points**; one is that God is alive and very active in this world today, just as he was in the days Abraham and Moses and Mary. The second point is that you and I are no different than Abraham or Moses or Mary. And the third point is that the one and only qualification we need to be a servant of God and do great things in this world is our own willingness to do according to God's word.
5. First, let's consider God's activity in the world. Science has done quite a bit to explain natural processes, like the way the earth revolves around the sun, and the moon revolves around the earth, and how gravity and centrifugal force keep the earth at a safe distance from the sun and the moon at a safe distance from the earth. My son James is so inspired from studying biology and genetics noting how amazingly our bodies work and how much we can discern from things that we can't see with our own eyes. The problem is that we congratulate ourselves on understanding many things but forget that God not only involved in these natural processes but he created them. The Bible was written by people who did not have the benefit of three thousand years of scientific discovery, so they might not call a solar eclipse a solar eclipse; they might not call a mental illness a mental illness. But does the fact that we understand how things happen make those things any less an act of God? We may say that the oxygen that we require in order to live is produced through plants by a process known as photosynthesis, but does that mean that God no longer supplies the air that we breathe? Didn't God *invent* photosynthesis? Understanding *how* God provides us with oxygen should amaze us all the more and cause us to praise him even more for his genius. But too often we end up congratulating ourselves on how clever we are for *discovering* how the process works and forget that God is active in the whole process. Imagine every living cell in every living organism draws life not from itself but from God. Imagine God being present in every facet of your

life, from your taste in music to your choice of soul mate. God is very much active in this world, and very much active in your life.

6. Point two: are we different from all the folks in the Bible who were “called” by God, or visited by an angel? Were they more gifted than us or more spiritual than us? Were they ethically or morally on firmer ground than you or me? Well let’s consider where some of them started: Moses was a fugitive tending his father-in-law’s sheep. David was the youngest and scrawniest son of Jesse and also a shepherd. Jacob was a liar and a cheat. Paul was a murderer (David would become a murderer as well). Peter was a fisherman and Matthew was a tax collector. And Mary? She was just a poor teenage girl from a fishing village. What made her special? The Church honors her as the mother of Jesus, but did she *prequalify* for that job? Was she more righteous or virtuous than her peers? It’s interesting that Mark’s gospel indicates that she had doubts about Jesus’ sanity once he began his ministry. Did she forget about the visit from the angel? Perhaps she always had lingering doubts about her experience. The point is that Mary and Abraham and Moses and David and Rachel and Ruth and Peter and Paul were no different from you and me. God did not recruit his servants from Harvard or Yale or Capital Hill or Buckingham Palace. He recruited them from every walk of life, every ethnicity, every gender, and yes, from every religion.
7. So what determines if you are a *favored one* or not? The answer rests in you. As I’ve shared with many of you, my calling was a surprise to me, and my response was no different from Mary’s; *Who am I that God would want me to be his messenger?* I’m not the sharpest tool in the shed as some of you know quite well. And so when I asked God, “Why me?” his rather comical response was, “Why *not* you?” And though I could appeal to all my limitations and all my idiosyncrasies, God just seemed to tap on the Bible and say, “Uh huh, and what do you suppose Moses had that you don’t have? What do you suppose David had that you don’t have? What did Mary have that don’t have? What did Peter have that you don’t have?”
8. And the answer was *nothing*. There is but one qualification for being a “favored one” of God, and that is faith. It’s believing that, if you decide to take the journey God wants you to take, that God will do great things through you. That’s God’s *modus operandi* by the way; he works *through* us. He worked specifically through three people in my life to bring me into ministry. And none of those three people were in any way famous or rich or powerful or any different from you or me. Yet without any one of them sharing God’s message with me, I would not be here today.
9. That would be the fourth message from today’s sermon though I know I should only have three. The first message is that God is as active in the world today as he was in ancient times. The second is that you are qualified to do God’s work in the world. The third is that God does great things through us simply when we consent to God doing great things through us, and the fourth is that “great” is a relative term. Some people think that the “greatest” acts of God are those that receive the most publicity, but some of the greatest acts of God go unrecognized by most of the world – the encouragement that we receive from our friends and parents, the forgiveness we receive from those we’ve hurt, the random acts of kindness that we all benefit from.

10. The question is, "What is God calling you to do, O Favored Ones?" You don't have to start your own non-profit organization to make your act something great. All Mary did was agree to "let it be done" according to God's word. Is there a journey that God is nudging you to take? And what is your first step going to be? It may simply be saying, "Let it be done" according to thy word. Whatever it may be, my prayer is that you would find the faith to take that step. I also pray that someday you can share that step with the congregation.

11. To help you along on this journey, I'm going to play Gabriel for you, and to do this I must put on my white robe. All you have to do is read the lines on the screen, and of course have the courage to "let it be done."

Me: "Greetings, favored ones. The Lord is with you and intends to do great things through you.

Congregation: "How can this be? We are ordinary, everyday people."

Me: "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 people God loves so much. For nothing is impossible with God.

Congregation: "Here am I, a servant of the Lord. Let it be with me according to your word."

Amen.