

*Greetings favored ones! The Lord is with you.* I heard about a man in a nursing home. Life was difficult for him and he constantly complained because he had no visitors and felt lonely and neglected. He seemed to have every right to complain as he did, considering the circumstances under which he lived. Then a person went to see him just before Christmas. There were Christmas cards on his wall and a poinsettia plant on the table and he told the visitor that the night before carolers from a local church came by and sang Christmas carols to him. When asked how he was doing, he said, "At Christmas time I am somebody." Maybe he felt favored by God.

A NOBODY IS A SOMEBODY at Christmas. In fact, there are NO NOBODIES at Christmas – wish that could be year-round. All of the things that surround the birth of Jesus are for us -- hope, joy, peace, and love. In our ordinariness, right where we are, God comes to us. At Christmas time we feel like somebody! Maybe that's what touches our hearts just so. We are reminded in this season, that we are favored by God! That we are all God's children!

Luke begins today's story by telling us, God sent the angel Gabriel to Nazareth, to a virgin pledged to be married to a man named Joseph. The angel went to this young girl and said, "Greetings, favored one! The Lord is

with you.” Mary, the young girl, was confused. I’m confused. Why Mary? What’s this about?

The angel said, “Don’t be afraid, Mary, for you have found favor with God.” The word used for *favor*, comes from the Greek word for “*grace*.” It means to be endued with God’s grace, or favor; to be dearly loved.

But, Luke does not tell us much about Mary. We don’t know her history, her biography. We know nothing about her, except she is betrothed to Joseph. Mary is wonderfully ordinary, much like any young woman, or so it seems. Why did God choose Mary? Luke doesn’t tell us.

Instead Luke focuses our attention on the child who is to be born, Jesus; *he who saves*. He will be the Son of the Most High; He will be Holy, the Son of God. Luke emphasizes the child, not the mother, but we nonetheless, ask the question, much like Mary did, “How is that possible?” Funny how we ask that question. The angel Gabriel must have known we would ask, because he says, “For nothing will be impossible with God.”

What is it about Mary that makes her appropriate as an object of God’s grace? Mary is perhaps, all of 13 or 14, maybe 15 years of age and the object of God’s grace. Startlingly, nothing in the text provides even a hint to the answer to that question. Luke identifies her simply as a young girl who was engaged to be married. In fact, more is said about Joseph than about

Mary. Even in the case of Zechariah and Elizabeth, the parents of John the Baptist, Luke explains that they are righteous and blameless, they kept God's commandments, they prayed to God. Yet not a single word describes the virtues or vices of Mary or explains why God might have chosen her.

Then Luke adds these words, "Mary was greatly troubled at his words and wondered what kind of greeting this might be." I see Mary contemplating and wondering, "**What does it mean to be favored by God?**"

I believe we are *favored ones* too; because you and I are wonderfully ordinary, because God chooses us, because God imbues us with grace!

The angel said to her, 'Do not be afraid, Mary, you have found favor with God. You will be with child and give birth to a son, and you are to give him the name Jesus.'

"How will this be,' Mary asked the angel?"

That is the point, isn't it? God chooses Mary because God can choose anyone. Mary doesn't earn the honor of becoming the mother of Jesus any more than any other woman. This text is not a biblical story where virtue is rewarded or where vice is punished. It is a story of the relentlessly unmerited nature of God's grace, a tsunami of grace which washes over Mary and all of us.

It's easier to say when things are going our way, "The Lord sure is blessing us." It's easier to have a merry Christmas with lots of fine presents under the tree when we think of ourselves and insulate ourselves from the world's problems.

Conversely, if we are going through a difficult time or when we feel like we can barely hold on, it's not so easy and yet, God is embuing us with his favor. The angel Gabriel, in saying that Mary was favored by God, was not saying that God would make her way easy. What the angel was saying was that Mary would be used of God, and in the long run of life, this is what being favored means. Mary had her whole life ahead of her, her own personal goals and plans. She was a young woman with aspirations to be married and raise a family. But, she surrendered herself for a greater purpose, for the purposes of God.

When we allow God to use us for a purpose – then we are the recipients of God's favor. We are favored ones! But my oh my, there's a lot to surrender to God isn't there?

**Yet, nothing is impossible with God.** I have often wondered, is it anymore difficult to believe that God gave Mary a virgin birth than it is to believe that Abraham and Sarah and Zechariah and Elizabeth bore children at an advanced age? If scientists were to announce tomorrow that a virgin

birth had been created in the laboratory, not many of us would dispute it. Science can do such amazing things nowadays. Then why do we want to deny the God who created science the ability to manipulate the laws of the universe and to give a baby a unique birth. **Nothing is impossible with God.**

This is a story of biblical impossibilities. But, what are the impossibilities in our world? What would we label "impossible" in our life? Peace in our world. Impossible! No way! Won't happen! Christian values returning to our nation, morality becoming the norm? Impossible! Our church reaching out its hands of mission into the surrounding community and making a difference? Restoring relationships, healing depression and mental illness in our lives? A relative or friend entering a relationship with Christ? Breaking an addiction and overcoming past hurts and disappointments? Impossible? Not with God!

We find ourselves with the same troubled mind as Mary, wondering about the impossibility of it all. We even ask the same question Mary asked, "How will this be?" To us it seems impossible! No way! Won't happen! The real question for people today is "How can the impossible become possible?" How are we favored by God? When do we know God's grace in our life?

God always gives us another way to look at things that happen. Remember that the next time you are in a hard place, nothing is impossible with God. God never overpowers us with certainty. Everything we know about God is seen “through a mirror dimly.” That’s what faith is all about. It is never certainty. It’s faith! There can always be another explanation. This is so we can be free to say yes to God. If you have difficulty with the idea of miracles, then God does not hold that against you. Many Christians, including theologians and Bible Scholars don’t believe in the virgin birth. All we’re saying today is, when it comes to God, be careful what you say is impossible. I believe what really matters to most of us is that God did send Christ into the world.

Mary’s response to God’s favor is also important. Mary identifies herself, “Here am I, the servant of the Lord.” Mary’s response recognizes that she has been selected by God and that God’s choosing leaves little room for her to do her own thing. Mary’s surrender to God’s will comes about as a result of God’s plan, not her own, “Let it be with me according to your word.”

I guess we should be careful whom we call favored, graced or blessed. We should be careful what we say is impossible. **And we should be thankful that this young woman said yes to God.**

"You mustn't be afraid, Mary," the angel said. And as he said it, he only hoped she wouldn't notice that beneath the great, golden wings he himself was trembling with fear to think that the whole future of creation hung now on the answer of a young girl." How would she answer? How do we answer -- for the Lord's favor in our lives?

"Greetings, favored ones! The Lord is with you." What an amazing gift this is, to be favored by God – fully accepted and completely loved. Martin Luther, who sparked the Protestant Reformation was deeply troubled by his sin. He struggled with the questions, "How can I be accepted by God?" and "How can I find favor with God?" Luther's breakthrough was the discovery that he was completely dependent on the mercy of God, that he was saved by the grace of God through faith in Jesus Christ. Luther had to surrender his will to follow God's will.

This insight ignited the Protestant Reformation, but in fact Luther's discovery was a rediscovery. He unearthed what Mary already knew – that salvation is a gift of God, one that comes through faith rather than works. The same is true for you and me: We are favored ones of God. Let us give Christ our gift of faith. Come to us, Emmanuel. Amen.